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SEPTEMBER

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Henry S. Whitehead

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CONTRACT

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HOUSE OF  
THE WORM

Merle Prout

A STRANGER  
CAME TO REAP

Stephen Dentinger

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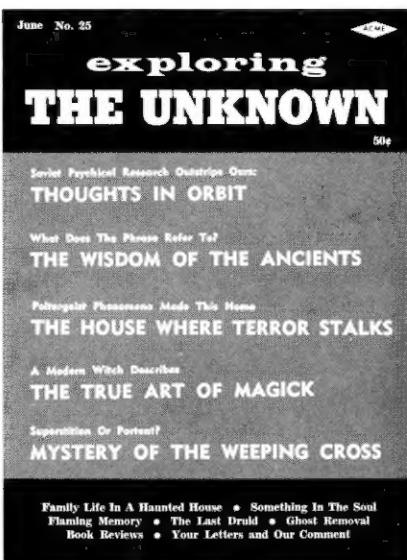
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MAGAZINE OF

# Horror

AND STRANGE STORIES

Volume 1

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Robert A. W. Lowndes, *Editor*

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## *Introduction*

While Henry S. Whitehead's story can certainly be described as "weird", according to the second definition listed in the **American College Dictionary**: "startling or extraordinarily singular", etc., the theme is also such that it might have appeared in a science fiction magazine at the time. Dr. Pelletier's discourse on pages 30-33 were in line with what was known on the subject at the time; and neither **Amazing Stories** nor **Wonder Stories**, in the 30's, was averse to running stories based upon little-realized aspects of science which did not go beyond what was then considered as possible. Anomalies, thought the editors, might well be considered "amazing" and conducive to "wonder"; and both T. O'Conor Sloane and Hugo Gernsback were partial to stories which included sound scientific information. Particularly gratifying is the scientific debunking of the "black baby" myth in relation to inter-racial marriages, when we consider that many "horror" tales of the period were based upon the legend of the white person marrying the "clear" Negro, and producing an ebony-colored infant.

The underlying theme of **The House Of The Worm** is also one which appeared in science fiction magazines during the 30's, although the treatment here is such that it is doubtful that any science fiction editor of the period would have dared to publish it; here it is a case of the trappings of a theme, rather than the theme itself which makes the difference. Yet, a science fiction writer could easily have rewritten the story and made it palatable to the readers of the two publications mentioned above.

While the realistic approach to ghosts may be traced to Defoe's **True Relation of the Apparition Of One Mrs. Veal**, as Leon Edel suggests, the modern approach to haunts can be fairly said to have gotten its start with Henry James, where the psychology of the haunter and the haunted, rather than the apparition itself, is the keynote of the story. The older-time concentration upon the ghost itself, and its motive for haunting has nonetheless made powerful stories which still have impact today — and can still be written today.

(Turn To Page 126)

# Cassius

by Henry S. Whitehead

While many science fiction fans of the late 20's and the 30's followed WEIRD TALES no less avidly than AMAZING STORIES, WONDER STORIES, and later ASTOUNDING STORIES, there were some who did not get on to this type of fiction in magazine form until the appearance of STRANGE TALES, in the summer of 1931. Your editor was one of these. After reading the first issue of the new magazine, we seized upon the first issue of WEIRD TALES we saw thereafter (as STRANGE TALES was a bi-monthly) and noted the name "Henry S. Whitehead" on the contents page. That rang a bell, for in the first issue of STRANGE TALES, we were advised "*Cassius* is coming!", and the names of authors we had encountered there stuck in our memory. Many wonderful tales by Whitehead were to follow, but it was not until we were saddened to read his obituary early in 1933 did we realize that this gentleman was The Rev. Henry S. Whitehead (1882-1932), a priest of the Protestant Episcopal Church, ordained deacon in 1912, advanced to the priesthood a year later, and at one time children's pastor at the Church of St. Mary The Virgin in New York City. Dr. Whitehead's ministry included a parish in the Virgin Islands, where he obtained the background for the many stories told by Gerald Canevin, most of which take place in the West Indies. Dr. Pelletier, whose need for a vacation can be called the proximate cause of the horror in the present tale, appears in several of the other stories; Colonel Lorriquer, who is mentioned in passing here, figures again in the novelet dealing with his wife, *Mrs. Lorriquer*; and various other characters pop up here and there in the series, which has no particular chronological order. *Cassius* was reprinted in the first collection of Dr. Whitehead's tales issued by Arkham House (*Jumbee and other Uncanny Tales*) in 1944 and was out of print before the second collection (*West India Lights*) appeared in 1946. When we looked last, this second volume was still available at \$3.00 from Arkham House, Sauk City, Wisconsin. And although The Rev. Dr. Whitehead was on our list of authors to present to you, we confess that we had not settled upon which story to offer first until Scott Kutina urged this one upon us.

MY HOUSE-MAN, Stephen Penn, who presided over the staff of my residence in St. Thomas, was not, strictly speaking, a native of that city. Penn came from the neighboring island of St. Jan. It is one of the ancient West Indian names, although there remain in the islands nowadays no Caucasians to bear that honorable cognomen.

Stephen's travels, however, had not been limited to the crossing from St. Jan — which, incidentally, is the authentic scene of R. L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island* — which lies little more than a rowboat's journey away from the capital of the Virgin Islands. Stephen had been "down the Islands," which means that he had been actually as far from home as Trinidad, or, perhaps, British Guiana, down through the great sweep of former mountain-tops, submerged by some vast, cataclysmic, prehistoric inundation and named the Bow of Ulysses by some fanciful, antique geographer. That odyssey of humble Stephen Penn had taken place because of his love for ships. He had had various jobs afloat and his exact knowledge of the house-man's art had been learned under various man-driving ship's stewards.

During this preliminary training for his life's work, Stephen had made many acquaintances. One of these, an upstanding, slim parchment colored Negro of

thirty or so, was Brutus Hellman. Brutus, like Stephen, had settled down in St. Thomas as a house-man. It was, in fact, Stephen who had talked him into leaving his native British Antigua, to try his luck in our American Virgin Islands. Stephen had secured for him his first job in St. Thomas, in the household of a naval officer.

FOR THIS friend of his youthful days, Stephen continued to feel a certain sense of responsibility; because, when Brutus happened to be abruptly thrown out of employment by the sudden illness and removal by the Naval Department of his employer in the middle of the winter season in St. Thomas, Stephen came to me and requested that his friend Brutus be allowed to come to me "on board-wages" until he was able to secure another place.

I acquiesced. I knew Brutus as a first-rate house-man. I was glad to give him a hand, to oblige the always agreeable and highly efficient Stephen, and, indeed, to have so skillful a servant added to my little staff in my bachelor quarters. I arranged for something more substantial than the remuneration asked for, and Brutus Hellman added his skilled services to those of the admirable Stephen. I was very well served that season and never had any occasion to regret

what both men alluded to as my "very great kindness!"

It was not long after Brutus Hellman had moved his simple belongings into one of the servants'-quarters cabins in my stone-paved ward, that I had another opportunity to do something for him. It was Stephen once more who presented his friend's case to me. Brutus, it appeared, had need of a minor operation, and the two of them, talking the matter over between themselves, had decided to ask me, their present patron, to arrange it.

I DID SO, with my friend Dr. Pelletier, Chief Surgeon, in charge of our Naval Station Hospital and regarded in Naval circles as the best man in the Medical Corps. I had not inquired about the nature of Brutus' affliction. Stephen had stressed the minor aspect of the required surgery, and that was all I mentioned to Dr. Pelletier.

It is quite possible that if Dr. Pelletier had not been going to Porto Rico on Thursday of that week, this narrative, the record of one of the most curious experiences I have ever had, would never have been set down. If Pelletier, his mind set on sailing at eleven, had not merely walked out of his operating-room as soon as he had finished with Brutus a little after eight that Thursday morning, left the dressing of the slight wound upon

Brutus' groin to be performed by his assistants, then that incredible affair which I can only describe as the persecution of the unfortunate Brutus Hellman would never have taken place.

It was on Wednesday, about two P. M., that I telephoned to Dr. Pelletier to ask him to perform an operation on Brutus.

"Send him over to the hospital this afternoon," Pelletier had answered, "and I'll look him over about five and operate the first thing in the morning — if there is any need for an operation! I'm leaving for San Juan at eleven, for a week."

I thanked him and went upstairs to my siesta, after giving Stephen the message to Brutus, who started off for the hospital about an hour later. He remained in the hospital until the following Sunday afternoon. He was entirely recovered from the operation, he reported. It had been a very slight affair, really, merely the removal of some kind of growth. He thanked me for my part in it when he came to announce dinner while I was reading on the gallery.

## II

IT WAS ON that Saturday morning, the day before Brutus got back, that I discovered something very curious in an obscure corner of my house-yard, just around the corner of

the wall of the three small cabins which occupy its north side. These cabins were tenantless except for the one at the east end of the row. That one was Brutus Hellman's. Stephen Penn, like my cook, washer, and scullery-maid, lived somewhere in the town.

I had been looking over the yard which was paved with old-fashioned flagging. I found it in excellent condition, weeded, freshly swept, and clean. The three stone servants-cubicles had been recently white-washed and glistened like cake-icing in the morning sun. I looked over this portion of my domain with approval, for I like things ship-shape. I glanced into the two narrow air spaces between the little, two-room houses. There were no cobwebs visible. Then I took a look around the east corner of Brutus Hellman's little house where there was a narrow passageway between the house and the high wall of antique Dutch brick, and there, well in towards the north wall, I saw on the ground what I first took to be a discarded toy which some child had thrown there, probably, it occurred to me, over the wall at the back of the stone cabins.

It looked like a doll's house, which if it had been thrown there, had happened to land right-side-up. It looked more or less like one of the quaint, old-fashioned beehives one still sees

occasionally in the conservative Lesser Antilles. But it could hardly be a beehive. It was far too small.

MY curiosity mildly aroused, I stepped into the alleyway and looked down at the odd little thing. Seen from where I stopped, it rewarded scrutiny. For it was, although made in a somewhat bungling way, a reproduction of an African village hut, thatched, circular, conical. The thatching, I suspected, had formerly been most of the business-end of a small house-broom of fine twigs tied together around the end of a stick. The little house's upright "logs" were a heterogeneous medley of little round sticks among which I recognized three dilapidated lead pencils and the broken-off handle of a tooth-brush. These details will serve to indicate its size and to justify my original conclusion that the thing was a rather cleverly made child's toy. How such a thing had got into my yard, unless over the wall, was an unimportant little mystery. The little hut, from the ground up to its thatched peak, stood about seven inches in height. Its diameter was perhaps, eight or nine inches.

My first reaction was to pick it up, look at it more closely, and then throw it into the wire cage in another corner of the yard where Stephen burned up waste paper and scraps at fre-

quent intervals. The thing was plainly a discarded toy, and had no business cluttering up my spotless yard. Then I suddenly remembered the washer's pick'ny, a small, silent, very black child of six or seven, who sometimes played quietly in the yard while his stout mother toiled over the washtub set up on a backless chair near the kitchen door where she could keep up a continuous stream of chatter with my cook.

I stayed my hand accordingly. Quite likely this little thatched hut was a valued item of that pick'ny's possessions. Thinking pleasantly to surprise little Aesculapius, or whatever the child's name might be, I took from my pocket a fifty-bit piece — value ten cents — intending to place the coin inside the little house, through its rounded, low entranceway.

STOOPING down, I shoved the coin through the doorway, and, as I did so, something suddenly scuttered about inside the hut, and pinched viciously at the ends of my thumb and forefinger.

I was, naturally, startled. I snatched my fingers away, and stood hastily erect. A mouse, perhaps a rat, inside there! I glanced at my fingers. There were no marks on them. The skin was not broken. That rodent's vicious little sharp teeth had fortunately missed their

grip as he snapped at me, intruding on his sacred privacy. Wondering a little I stepped out of the alleyway and into the sunny, open yard, somewhat upset at this Lilliputian *contretemps*, and resolved upon telling Stephen to see to it that there was no ugly rodent there when next little Aesculapius should retrieve his plaything.

But when I arrived at the gallery steps my friend Colonel Lorriquer's car was just drawing up before the house, and, in hastening to greet welcome early-morning callers and later in accepting Mrs. Lorriquer's invitation to dinner and contract at their house that evening, the little hut and its unpleasant inhabitant were driven wholly out of my mind.

I did not think of it again until several days later, on the night when my premises had become the theater for one of the most inexplicable, terrifying, and uncanny happenings I have ever experienced.

### III

MY GALLERY is a very pleasant place to sit evenings, except in that spring period during which the West Indian candle-moths hatch in their myriads and, for several successive days, make it impossible to sit outdoors, in any lighted, unscreened place.

It was much too early for the

candle-moths, however, at the time I am speaking of, and on the evening of that Sunday upon which Brutus Hellman returned from the hospital, a party of four persons including myself, occupied the gallery.

The other man was Arthur Carswell, over from Haiti on a short visit. The two ladies were Mrs. Spencer, Colonel Lorriquer's widowed daughter, and her friend, Mrs. Squire. We had dined an hour previously at the Grand Hotel as guests of Carswell, and having taken our coffee at my house, were remaining outdoors on the gallery "for a breath of air" on a rather warm and sultry February evening. We were sitting, quietly talking in a rather desultory manner, all of us unspokenly reluctant to move inside the house for a projected evening at contract.

It was, as I recall the hour, about nine o'clock, the night warm, as I have said, and very still. Above, in a cloudless sky of luminous indigo, the tropical stars glowed enormous. The intoxicating sweet odors of white jessamine and tuberoses made the still air redolent. No sound, except an occasional rather languid remark from one of ourselves, broke the exquisite, balmy stillness.

Then, all at once, without any warning and with an abruptness which caused Carswell and me to stand up, the exquisite perfection of the night was rudely

shattered by an appalling, sustained scream of sheer mortal terror.

THAT scream inaugurated what seems to me as I look back upon the next few days, to be one of the most unnerving, devastating, and generally horrible periods I can recall in a lifetime not devoid of adventure. I formulated at that time, and still retain, mentally, a phrase descriptive of it. It was "The Reign of Terror."

Carswell and I, following the direction of the scream, rushed down the outer gallery steps and back through the yard towards the cabins. As I have mentioned, only one of these was occupied, Brutus Hellman's. As we rounded the corner of the house a faint light — it was Brutus' oil lamp — appeared in the form of a wide vertical strip at the entrance of the occupied cabin. To that we ran as to a beacon, and pushed into the room.

The lamp, newly lighted, and smoking, its glass chimney set on askew as though in great haste, dimly illuminated a strange scene. Doubled up and sitting on the side of his bed, the bedclothes near the bed's foot lumped together where he had flung them, cowered Brutus. His face was a dull, ashen gray in the smokey light, his back was bent, his hands clasped tightly about his shin. And, from between those clenched hands, a

steady stream of blood stained the white sheet which hung over the bed's edge and spread below into a small pool on the cabin room's stone-paved floor.

Brutus, groaning dismally, rocked back and forth, clutching his leg. The lamp smoked steadily, defiling the close air, while, incongruously, through the now open doorway poured streams and great pulsing breaths of night-blooming tropical flowers, mingling strangely with the hot, acrid odor of the smoking lamp-wick.

CARSWELL WENT directly to the lamp, straightened the chimney, turned down the flame. The lamp ceased its ugly reek and the air of the cabin cleared as Carswell, turning away from the lamp, threw wide the shutters of the large window which, like most West Indian Negroes, Brutus had closed against the "night air" when he retired.

I gave my attention directly to the man, and by the time the air had cleared somewhat I had him over on his back in a reclining position, and with a great strip torn from one of his bed-sheets, was binding up the ugly deep little wound in the lower muscle of his leg just at the outside of the shin-bone. I pulled the improvised bandage tight, and the flow of blood ceased, and Brutus, his mind probably somewhat relieved by this timely aid, put an end to his moan-

ing, and turned his ashy face up to mine.

"Did you see it, sar?" he inquired, biting back the trembling of his mouth.

I paid practically no attention to this remark. Indeed, I barely heard it. I was, you see, very busily engaged in staunching the flow of blood. Brutus had already lost a considerable quantity, and my rough bandaging was directed entirely to the end of stopping this. Instead of replying to Brutus' question I turned to Carswell, who had finished with the lamp and the window, and now stood by, ready to lend a hand in his efficient way.

"Run up to the bathroom, will you, Carswell, and bring me a couple of rolls of bandage, from the medicine closet, and a bottle of mercurochrome." Carswell disappeared on this errand and I sat, holding my hands tightly around Brutus' leg, just above the bandage. Then he repeated his question, and this time I paid attention to what he was saying.

"SEE WHAT, Brutus?" I inquired, and looked at him, almost for the first time — into his eyes, I mean. Hitherto I had been looking at my bandaging.

I saw a stark terror in those eyes.

"It," said Brutus; "de T'ing, sar."

I sat on the side of the bed

and looked at him. I was, naturally, puzzled.

"What thing, Brutus?" I asked, very quietly, almost soothingly. Such terror possessed my second house-man that, I considered, he must, for the time being, be treated like a frightened child.

"De T'ing what attack me, sar," explained Brutus.

"What was it like?" I countered. "Do you mean it is still here — in your rooms?"

At that Brutus very nearly collapsed. His eyes rolled up and their irises nearly disappeared; he shuddered as though with a violent chill, from head to foot. I let go his leg. The blood would be no longer flowing, I felt sure, under that tight bandaging of mine. I turned back the bedclothes, rolled poor Brutus under them, tucked him in. I took his limp hands and rubbed them smartly. At this instant Carswell came in through the still open doorway, his hands full of first-aid material. This he laid without a word on the bed beside me, and stood looking at Brutus, slightly shaking his head. I turned to him.

I RAISED Brutus' head from the pillow, his teeth audibly chattering as I did so, and just as I was getting the brandy between his lips, there came a slight scuttering sound from under the bed, and something, a small, dark, sinister-looking ani-

mal of about the size of a mongoose, dashed on all fours across the open space between the bed's corner and the still open doorway and disappeared into the night outside. Without a word Carswell ran after it, turning sharply to the left and running past the open window. I dropped the empty brandy cup, lowered Brutus' head hastily to its pillow, and dashed out of the cabin. Carswell was at the end of the cabins, his flashlight stabbing the narrow alleyway where I had found the miniature African hut. I ran up to him.

"It went up here," said Carswell laconically.

I stood beside him in silence, my hand on his shoulder. He brightened every nook and cranny of the narrow alleyway with his light. There was nothing, alive, to be seen. The Thing had had, of course, ample time to turn some hidden corner behind the cabins, to bury itself out of sight in some accustomed hiding place, even to climb over the high, rough-surfaced back wall. Carswell brought his flashlight to rest finally on the little hut-like thing which still stood in the alleyway.

"What's that?" he inquired. "Looks like some child's toy."

"That's what I supposed when I discovered it," I answered. "I imagine it belongs to the washer's pickaninny." We stepped into the alleyway. It was not quite wide enough for us to walk a-

breast. Carswell followed me in. I turned over the little hut with my foot. There was nothing under it. I daresay the possibility of this as a cache for the Thing had occurred to Carswell and me simultaneously. That, however, settled it. The Thing, mongoose, or whatever it was, had got clean away.

WE RETURNED to the cabin and found Brutus recovering from his ague-like trembling fit. His eyes were calmer now. The reassurance of our presence, the bandaging, had had their effect. Brutus proceeded to thank us for what we had done for him.

Helped by Carswell, I gingerly removed my rough bandage. The blood about that ugly bite — for a bite it certainly was, with unmistakable tooth-marks around its badly torn edges — was clotted now. The flow had ceased. We poured mercurochrome over and through the wound, disinfecting it, and then I placed two entire rolls of three-inch bandage about Brutus' wounded ankle. Then, with various encouragements and reassurances, we left him, the lamp still burning at his request, and went back to the ladies.

Our contract game was, somehow, a jumpy one, the ladies having been considerably upset by the scare down there in the yard, and we concluded it early, Carswell driving Mrs. Spencer home and I walking down the

hill with Mrs. Squire to the Grand Hotel where she was spending that winter.

It was still several minutes short of midnight when I returned, after a slow walk up the hill, to my house. I had been thinking of the incident all the way up the hill. I determined to look in upon Brutus Hellman before retiring, but first I went up to my bedroom and loaded a small automatic pistol, and this I carried with me when I went down to the cabins in the yard. Brutus' light was still going, and he was awake, for he responded instantly to my tap on his door.

I WENT IN and talked with the man for a few minutes. I left him the gun, which he placed carefully under his pillow. At the door I turned and addressed him:

"How do you suppose the thing — whatever it was that attacked you, Brutus — could have got in, with everything closed up tight?"

Brutus replied that he had been thinking of this himself and had come to the conclusion that "de Ting" had concealed itself in the cabin before he had retired and closed the window and door. He expressed himself as uneasy with the window open, as Carswell and I had left it.

"But, man, you should have the fresh air while you sleep.

You don't want your place closed up like a field-laborer's, do you?" said I, rallyingly. Brutus grinned.

"No, sar," said he, slowly, "'aint dat I be afeared of de Jumbee! I daresay it born in de blood, sar. I is close up everyting by instinct! Besides, sar, now dat de Ting attackin' me, p'raps bes' to have the window close up tightly. Den de Ting cyant possiblymek an entrance 'pon me!"

I assured Brutus that the most agile mongoose could hardly clamber up that smooth, whitewashed wall outside and come in that window. Brutus smiled, but shook his head nevertheless.

"Taint a mongoose, nor a rat, neither, sar," he remarked, as he settled himself for rest under the bedclothes.

"What do you think it is, then?" I inquired.

"Only de good Gawd know, sar," replied Brutus cryptically.

#### IV

I WAS PERHAPS halfway across the house-yard on my way to turn in when my ears were assailed by precisely one of those suppressed combinations of squeals and grunts which John Masefield describes as presaging an animal tragedy under the hedge of an English countryside on a moonlit summer night. Something — a brief.

ruthless combat for food or blood, between two small ground animals — was going on somewhere in the vicinity. I paused, listened, my senses the more readily attuned to this bitter duel because of what had happened in Brutus' cabin. As I passed, the squeals of the fighting animals abruptly ceased. One combatant, apparently, had given up the ghost! A grunting noise persisted for a few instants, however, and it made me shudder involuntarily. These sounds were low, essentially bestial, commonplace. Yet there was in them something so savage, albeit on the small scale of our everyday West Indian fauna, as to give me pause. I could feel the beginning of a cold shudder run down my spine under my white drill jacket!

I turned about, almost reluctantly, drawn somehow, in spite of myself, to the scene of combat. The grunts had ceased now, and to my ears, in the quiet of that perfect night of soft airs and moonlight, there came the even more horrible little sound of the tearing of flesh! It was gruesome, quite horrible, well-nigh unbearable. I paused again, a little shaken, it must be confessed, my nerves a trifle unstrung. I was facing in the direction of the ripping sounds now. Then there was silence — complete, tranquil, absolute!

THEN I stepped toward the

scene of this small conflict, my flashlight sweeping that corner of the yard nearest the small alleyway.

It picked up the victim almost at once, and I thought — I could not be quite sure — that I saw at the very edge of the circle of illumination, the scrambling flight of the victor. The victim was commonplace. It was the body, still slightly palpitating, of a large, well-nourished rat. The dead rat lay well out in the yard, its freshly drawn vital fluid staining a wide smear on the flagstone which supported it — a ghastly-looking affair. I looked down at it curiously. It had, indeed, been a ruthless attack to which this lowly creature had succumbed. Its throat was torn out, it was disembowelled, riven terrifically. I stepped back to Brutus' cabin, went in, and picked up from a pile of them on his bureau a copy of one of our small-sheet local newspapers. With this, nodding smilingly at Brutus I proceeded once more to the scene of carnage. I had an idea. I laid the paper down, kicked the body of the rat upon it with my foot, and picking up the paper, carried the dead rat into Brutus' cabin. I turned up his lamp and carried it over to the bedside.

"Do you suppose this was your animal, Brutus?" I asked. "If so, you seem to be pretty well avenged!"

Brutus grinned and looked closely at the riven animal. Then:

"No, sar," he said, slowly, " 'Twas no rat whut attacked me, sar. See de t'roat, please, sar. Him ahl tore out, mos' effectively! No, sar. But — surmise — from de appearance of dis t'roat, de mouf which maim me on de laig was de same mouf what completely ruin this rat!"

And, indeed, judging from the appearance of the rat Brutus' judgment might well be sound.

I wrapped the paper about it, said good night once more to Hellman, carried it out with me, threw it into the metal waste-basket in which the house-trash is burned every morning, and went to bed.

AT THREE minutes past four the next morning I was snatched out of my comfortable bed and a deep sleep by the rattle of successive shots from the wicked little automatic I had left with Brutus. I jumped into my bathrobe, thrust my feet into my slippers, and was downstairs on the run, almost before the remnants of sleep were out of my eyes and brain. I ran out through the kitchen, as the nearest way, and was inside Brutus' cabin before the empty pistol, still clutched in his hand and pointed toward the open window, had ceased smoking. My first words were:

"Did you get it, Brutus?" I

was thinking of the thing in terms of "It."

"Yes, sar," returned Brutus, lowering his pistol. "I t'ink I scotch him, sar. Be please to look on de windowsill. P'raps some blood in evidence, sar."

I did so, and found that Brutus' markmanship was better than I had anticipated when I entrusted him with the gun. To be sure, he had fired off all seven bullets, and, apparently, scored only one hit. A small, single drop of fresh blood lay on the white-painted wooden windowsill. No other trace of the attacker was in evidence. My flashlight revealed no marks, and the smooth, freshly-whitewashed wall outside was unscathed. Unless the Thing had wings — something suddenly touched me on the forehead, something light and delicate. I reached up, grasping. My hand closed around something like a string. I turned the flashlight up and there hung a thin strand of liana stem. I pulled it. It was firmly fastened somewhere up above there. I stepped outside, with one of Brutus' chairs, placed this against the outer wall under the window, and, standing on it, raked the eaves with the flashlight. The upper end of the liana stem was looped about a small projection in the gutter, just above the window.

The Thing, apparently, knew enough to resort to this mech-

anical method for its second attack that night.

Inside, Brutus, somewhat excited over his exploit, found a certain difficulty in describing just what it was that had drawn his aim.

"It hav de appearance of a frog, sar," he vouchsafed. "I is wide awake when de T'ing land himse'f 'pon de sill, an' I hav opportunity for takin' an excellent aim, sar." That was the best I could get out of Brutus. I tried to visualize a "Thing" which looked like a frog, being able to master one of our big, ferocious rats and tear out its inner parts and go off with them, not to mention liana stems with loop-knots in them to swing from a roof to an open window, and which could make a wound like the one above Brutus Hellman's ankle. It was rather too much for me. But — the Reign of Terror had begun, and no mistakel

## V

RUNNING OVER this summary in my mind as I stood and listened to Brutus telling about his markmanship, it occurred to me, in a somewhat fantastic light, I must admit — the idea of calling in "science" to our aid, forming the fantastic element — that the Thing had left a clue which might well be unmistakable; something which, suitably

managed, might easily clear up the mounting mystery.

I went back to the house, broached my medicine closet, and returned to the cabin with a pair of glass microscopic slides. Between these I made a smear of the still fresh and fluid blood on the window-sill, and went back to my room, intending to send the smear later in the morning to Dr. Pelletier's laboratory-man at the Municipal Hospital.

I left the slides there myself, requesting Dr. Brownell to make me an analysis of the specimen with a view to determining its place in the gamut of West Indian fauna, and that afternoon, shortly after the siesta hour, I received a telephone call from the young physician. Dr. Brownell had a certain whimsical cast apparent in his voice which was new to me. He spoke, I thought, rather banteringly.

"Where did you get your specimen, Mr. Canevin?" he inquired. "I understood you to say it was the blood of some kind of lower animal."

"Yes," said I, "that was what I understood, Dr. Brownell. Is there something peculiar about it?"

"Well . . ." said Dr. Brownell slowly, and somewhat banteringly, "yes — and no. The only queer thing about it is that it's — human blood, possibly a Negro's."

I managed to thank him, even

to say that I did not want the specimen returned, in answer to his query, and we rang off.

The plot, it seemed to me, was, in the language of the tradition of strange occurrences, thickening! This, then, must be Brutus' blood. Brutus' statement, that he had shot at and struck the marauder at his open window, must be imagination — Negro talk! But, even allowing that it was Brutus' blood — there was, certainly, no one else about to supply that drop of fresh fluid which I had so carefully scraped up on my two glass slides — how had he got blood, from his wounded lower leg, presumably, on that high window-sill. To what end would the man lie to me on such a subject? Besides, certainly he had shot at something — the pistol was smoking when I got to his room. And then — the liana stem How was that to be accounted for?

Dr. Brownell's report made the whole thing more complicated than it had been before. Science, which I had so cheerfully invoked, had only served to make this mystery deeper and more inexplicable.

## VI

HANDICAPPED by nothing more than a slight limp Brutus Hellman was up and attending to his duties about the house the next day. In response to my careful questioning, he had re-

peated the story of his shooting in all particulars just as he had recounted that incident to me in the gray hours of the early morning. He had even added a particular which fitted in with the liana stem as the means of ingress. The Thing, he said, had appeared to swing down onto the window-sill from above, as he, awake for the time being between cat-naps, had first seen it and reached for the pistol underneath his pillow and then opened fire.

Nothing happened throughout the day; nor, indeed, during the Reign of Terror as I have called it, did anything untoward occur throughout, except at night. That evening, shortly after eight o'clock, Brutus retired, and Stephen Penn, who had accompanied him to his cabin, reported to me that, in accordance with my suggestion, the two of them had made an exhaustive search for any concealed "Thing" which might have secreted itself about Brutus' premises. They had found nothing, and Brutus, his window open, but provided with a tight-fitting screen which had been installed during the day, had fallen asleep before Stephen left. Penn had carefully closed the cabin door behind him, making sure that it was properly latched.

The attack that night — I had been sleeping "with one eye open" — did not come until two o'clock in the morning. This

time Brutus had no opportunity to use the gun, and so I was not awakened until it was all over. It was, indeed, Brutus calling me softly from the yard at a quarter past two that brought me to my feet and to the window.

"Yes," said I, "what is it, Brutus?"

"You axed me to inform you, sar, of anything," explained Brutus from the yard.

"Right! What happened? Wait, Brutus, I'll come down," and I hurriedly stepped into bathrobe and slippers.

BRUTUS WAS waiting for me at the kitchen door, a hand to his left cheek, holding a handkerchief rolled into a ball. Even in the moonlight I could see that this makeshift dressing was bright red. Brutus, it appeared, had suffered another attack of some kind. I took him into the house and upstairs, and dressed the three wounds in his left cheek in my bathroom. He had been awakened without warning, fifteen minutes before, with a sudden hurt, had straightened up in bed, but not before two more stabs, directly through the cheek, had been delivered. He had only just seen the Thing scrambling down over the foot of the bed, as he came awake under the impetus of these stabs, and, after a hasty search for the attacker had wisely devoted himself to staunching his bleeding

face. Then, trembling in every limb, he had stepped out into the yard and come under my window to call me.

The three holes through the man's cheek were of equal size and similar appearance, obviously inflicted by some stabbing implement of about the diameter of a quarter-inch. The first stab, Brutus thought, had been the highest up, and this one had not only penetrated into the mouth of others, but had severely scratched the gum of the upper jaw just above his eye-tooth. I talked to him as I dressed these three wounds. "So the thing must have been concealed inside your room, you think, Brutus?"

"Undoubtedly, sar," returned Brutus. "There was no possible way for It to crawl in 'pon me—de door shut tight, the window-screen undisturb', sar."

The poor fellow was trembling from head to foot with shock and fear, and I accompanied him back to his cabin. He had not lighted his lamp. It was only by the light of the moon that he had seen his assailant disappear over the foot of the bed. He had seized the handkerchief and run out into the yard in his pajamas.

I lit the lamp, determining to have electricity put into the cabin the next day, and, with Brutus' assistance, looked carefully over the room. Nothing, apparently, was hidden anywhere; there was only a little space to

search through; Brutus had few belongings; the cabin furniture was adequate but scanty. There were no superfluities, no place, in other words, in which the Thing could hide itself.

Whatever had attacked Brutus was indeed going about its work with vicious cunning and determination.

## VII

BRUTUS TURNED in, and after sitting beside him for a while, I left the lamp turned down, closed the door, and took my departure.

Brutus did not turn up in the morning, and Stephen Penn, returning from an investigatory visit to the cabin came to me on the gallery about nine o'clock with a face as gray as ashes. He had found Brutus unconscious, the bed soaked in blood, and, along the great pectoral muscle where the right arm joins the body, a long and deep gash from which the unfortunate fellow had, apparently, lost literally quarts of blood. I telephoned for a doctor and hurried to the cabin.

Brutus was conscious upon my arrival, but so weakened from loss of blood as to be quite unable to speak. On the floor, beside the bed, apparently where it had fallen, lay a medium-sized pocket knife, its largest blade open, soaked in blood. Apparently this had been

the instrument with which he had been wounded.

The doctor, soon after his arrival, declared a blood-transfusion to be necessary, and this operation was performed at eleven o'clock in the cabin, Stephen contributing a portion of the blood, a young Negro from the town, paid for his service, the rest. After that, and the administration of a nourishing hot drink, Brutus was able to tell us what had happened.

Against his own expectations, he had fallen asleep immediately after my departure, and, curiously, had been awakened not by any attack upon him, but by the booming of a *rata* drum from somewhere up in the hills back of the town where some of the Negroes were, doubtless, "making magic," a common enough occurrence in any of the *vodu*-ridden West India islands. But this, according to Brutus, was no ordinary awakening.

No — for, on the floor, beside his bed, *dancing to the distant drumbeats*, he had seen — it!

THAT BRUTUS had possessed some idea of the identity or character of his assailant, previous to this occurrence of his most serious wound, I had strongly suspected. I had gathered this impression from half a dozen little things, such as his fervid denial that the creature which had bitten him was either a rat or a mongoose; his "Gawd

know" when I had asked him what the Thing was like.

Now I understood, clearly of course, that Brutus knew what kind of creature had concealed itself in his room. I even elicited the fact, discovered by him — just how I am quite unaware — that the Thing had hidden under a loose floor board beneath his bed and so escaped detection on the several previous searches.

But to find out from Brutus — the only person who knew — that, indeed, was quite another affair. There can be, I surmise, no human being as consistently and completely shut-mouthed as a West Indian Negro, once such a person has definitely made up his mind to silence on a given subject! And on this subject, Brutus had, it appeared, quite definitely made up his mind. No questions, no cajolery, no urging — even with tears, on the part of his lifelong friend Stephen Penn — could elicit from him the slightest remark bearing on the description or identity of the Thing. I myself used every argument which logic and common sense presented to my Caucasian mind. I urged his subsequent safety upon Brutus, my earnest desire to protect him, the logical necessity of co-operating, in the stubborn fellow's own obvious interest, with us who had his safety and welfare at heart. Stephen, as I have said, even wept! But all these efforts on our part were of no avail.

Brutus Hellman resolutely refused to add a single word to what he had already said. He had awakened to the muted booming of the distant drum. He had seen the Thing dancing beside his bed. He had, it appeared, fainted from this shock, whatever the precise nature of that shock may have been, and knew nothing more until he came slowly to a vastly weakened consciousness between Stephen Penn's visit to him late in the morning, and mine which followed it almost at once.

THERE WAS one fortunate circumstance. The deep and wide cut which had, apparently, been inflicted upon him with his own pocket-knife — it had been lying, open, by mere chance, on a small tabouret beside his bed — had been delivered lengthwise of the pectoral muscle, not across that muscle, otherwise the fellow's right arm would have been seriously crippled for life. The major damage he had suffered in this last and most serious attack had been the loss of blood, and this, through my employment of one donor of blood and Stephen Penn's devotion in giving him the remainder, had been virtually repaired.

However, whether he spoke or kept silent, it was plain to me that I had a very definite duty toward Brutus Hellman. I could not, if anything were to be done to prevent it, have him attacked

in this way while in my service and living on my premises.

The electricity went in that afternoon, with a pull-switch placed near the hand of whoever slept in the bed, and, later in the day, Stephen Penn brought up on a donkey cart from his town lodging-place, his own bedstead, which he set up in Brutus' room, and his bureau containing the major portion of his belongings, which he placed in the newly-swept and garnished cabin next door. If the Thing repeated its attack that night, it would have Stephen, as well as Brutus, to deal with.

One contribution to our knowledge Stephen made, even before he had actually moved into my yard. This was the instrument with which Brutus had been stabbed through the cheek. He found it cached in the floor-space underneath that loose board where the Thing had hidden itself. He brought it to me, covered with dried blood. It was a rough, small-scale reproduction of an African "assegai", or stabbing-spear. It was made out of an ordinary butcher's hardwood meat-skewer, its head a splinter of pointed glass such as might be picked up anywhere about the town. The head — and this was what caused the resemblance to an assegai — was very exactly and neatly bound on to the cleft end of the skewer, with fishline. On the whole, and considered as

a piece of work, the "assegai" was a highly creditable job.

### VIII

IT WAS ON the morning of this last-recorded attack on Brutus Hellman during the period between my visit to him and the arrival of the doctor and the man for the blood-transfusion, that I sat down, at my desk, in an attempt to figure out some conclusion from the facts already known. I had progressed somewhat with my theoretical investigation at that time. When later, after Brutus could talk, he mentioned the circumstance of the Thing's dancing there on his cabin floor, to the notes of a drum, in the pouring moonlight which came through his screened window and gave its illumination to the little room, I came to some sort of indeterminate decision. I will recount the steps — they are very brief — which led up to this.

The facts, as I noted them down on paper that day, pointed to a pair of alternatives. Either Brutus Hellman was demented, and had invented his "attacks," having inflicted them upon himself for some inscrutable reason; or — the Thing was possessed of qualities not common among the lower animals! I set the two groups of facts side by side, and compared them.

Carswell and I had actually seen the Thing as it ran out of

the cabin that first night. Something, presumably the same Thing, had torn a large rat to pieces. The same Thing had bitten Brutus' lower leg, Brutus' description of it was that it looked "like a frog". Those four facts seemed to indicate one of the lower animals, though its genus and the motive for its attacks were unknown!

On the other hand, there was a divergent set of facts. The Thing had used mechanical means, a liana stem with a looped knot in it, to get into Brutus' cabin through the window. It had used some stabbing instrument, later found, and proving to be a manufactured affair. Again, later, it had used Brutus' knife in its final attack. All these facts pointed to some such animal as a small monkey. This theory was strengthened by the shape of the bites on Brutus' leg and on the rat's throat.

That it was *not* a monkey, however, there was excellent evidence. The Thing looked like a frog. A frog is a very different-looking creature from any known kind of monkey. There were, so far as I knew, no monkeys at the time on the island of St. Thomas.

I ADDED TO these sets of facts two other matters: The blood alleged to be drawn from the Thing had, on analysis, turned out to be human blood. The single circumstance pointed

very strongly to the insanity theory. On the other hand, Brutus could hardly have placed the fresh blood which I had myself scraped up on my slides, on the windowsill where I found it. Still, he might have done so, if his "insanity" were such as to allow for an elaborately "planted" hoax or something of the kind. He could have placed the drop of blood there, drawn from his own body by means of a pin-prick, before he fired the seven cartridges that night. It was possible. But, knowing Brutus, it was so improbable as to be quite absurd.

The final circumstance was the little "African" hut. That, somehow, seemed to fit in with the "assegai." The two naturally went together.

It was a jumble, a puzzle. The more I contrasted and compared these clues, the more impossible the situation became.

Well, there was one door open, at least. I decided to go through that door and see where it led me. I sent for Stephen. It was several hours after the blood-transfusion. I had to get some of Brutus' blood for my experiment, but it must be blood drawn previous to the transfusion. Stephen came to see what I wanted.

"Stephen," said I, "I want you to secure from Hellman's soiled things one of those very bloody sheets, which you changed on

his bed today, and bring it here."

Stephen goggled at me, but went at once on this extraordinary errand. He brought me the sheet. On one of its corners, there was an especially heavy mass of clotted blood. From the underside of this I managed to secure a fresh enough smear on a pair of glass slides, and with these I stepped into my car and ran down to the hospital and asked for Dr. Brownell.

I gave him the slides and asked him to make me an analysis for the purpose of comparing this blood with the specimen I had given him two days before. My only worry was whether or not they had kept a record of the former analysis, it being a private job and not part of the hospital routine. They had recorded it, however, and Dr. Brownell obligingly made the test for me then and there. Half an hour after he had stepped into the laboratory he came back to me. "Here are the records," he said. "The two specimens are unquestionably from the same person, presumably a Negro. They are virtually identical."

THE BLOOD alleged to be the Thing's, then, was merely Brutus' blood. The strong presumption was, therefore, that Brutus had lost his mind.

Into this necessary conclusion, I attempted to fit the remaining facts. Unfortunately for the sake

of any solution, they did not fit! Brutus might, for some insane reason, have inflicted the three sets of wounds upon himself. But Brutus had not made the "African" hut, which had turned up before he was back from the hospital. He had not, presumably, fastened that liana stem outside his window. He had not, certainly, slain the rat, nor could he have "invented" the creature which both Carswell and I had seen, however vaguely, running out of his cabin that night of the first attack.

At the end of all my cogitations, I knew absolutely nothing, except what my own senses had conveyed to me; and these discordant facts I have already set down in their order and sequence, precisely and accurately, as they occurred.

To these I now add the additional fact that upon the night following the last recorded attack on Brutus Hellman, nothing whatever happened. Neither he nor Stephen Penn, sleeping side by side in their two beds in the cabin room, were in any way disturbed.

I wished, fervently, that Dr. Pelletier were at hand. I needed someone like him to talk to. Carswell would not answer, somehow. No one would answer. I needed Pelletier, with his incisive mind, his scientific training, his vast knowledge of the West Indies, his open-mindedness to facts wherever these and

their contemplation might lead the investigator. I needed Pelletier very badly indeed!

And Pelletier was still over in Porto Rico.

Only one further circumstance, and that, apparently, an irrelevant one, can be added to the facts already narrated — those incongruous facts which did not appear to have any reasonable connection with one another and seemed to be mystifyingly contradictory. The circumstance was related to me by Stephen Penn, and it was nothing more or less than the record of a word, a proper name. This Stephen alleged, Brutus had repeated, over and over, as, under the effects of the two degrees of temperature which he was carrying as the result of his shock and of the blood transfusion, he had tossed about restlessly during a portion of the night. That name was, in a sense, a singularly appropriate one for Brutus to utter, even though one would hardly suspect the fellow of having any acquaintance with Roman history, or, indeed, with the words of William Shakespeare!

The name was -- Cassius!

I figured that anyone bearing the Christian name, Brutus, must, in the course of a lifetime, have got wind of the original Brutus' side-partner. The two names naturally go together, of course, like Damon and Pythias, David and Jonathan! However, I

s a i d nothing about this to Brutus.

## IX

I WAS IN the concrete wharf beside the Naval Administration Building long before the *Grebe* arrived from San Juan on the Thursday morning a week after Brutus Hellman's operation.

I wanted to get Pelletier's ear at the earliest possible moment. Nearby, in the waiting line against the wall of the Navy building, Stephen Penn at the wheel, stood my car. I had telephoned Pelletier's man that he need not meet the doctor. I was going to do that myself, to get what facts, whatever explanation Pelletier might have to offer as I drove him through the town and up the precipitous roadways of Denmark Hill to his house at its summit.

My bulky, hard-boiled, genial naval surgeon friend, of the keen, analytical brain and the skillful hands which so often skirted the very edges of death in his operating-room, was unable, however, to accompany me at once upon his arrival. I had to wait more than twenty minutes for him, while others, who had prior claims upon him, interviewed him. At last he broke away from the importunate ones and heaved his unwieldly bulk into the back seat of my car beside me. Among those who had waylaid him, I recognized Doc-

tors Roots and Maguire, both naval surgeons.

I had not finished my account of the persecution to which Brutus Hellman had been subjected by the time we arrived at the doctor's hilltop abode. I told Stephen to wait for me and finished the story inside the house while Pelletier's house-man was unpacking his traveling valises. Pelletier heard me through in virtual silence, only occasionally interrupting with a pertinent question. When I had finished he lay back in his chair, his eyes closed.

HE SAID NOTHING for several minutes. Then, his eyes still shut, he raised and slightly waved his big awkward-looking hand, that hand of such uncanny skill when it held a knife, and began to speak, very slowly and reflectively:

"Dr. Roots mentioned a peculiar circumstance on the wharf."

"Yes?" said I.

"Yes," said Dr. Pelletier. He shifted his ungainly bulk in his big chair, opened his eyes and looked at me. Then, very deliberately:

"Roots reported the disappearance of the thing — it was a parasitic growth — that I removed from your house-man's side a week ago. When they had dressed the fellow and sent him back to the ward Roots intended to look the thing over in the lab-

oratory. It was quite unusual. I'll come to that in a minute. But when he turned to pick it up, it was gone; had quite disappeared. The nurse, Miss Charles, and he looked all over for it, made a very thorough search. That was one of the things he came down for this morning — to report that to me." Once again Pelletier paused, looked at me searchingly, as though studying me carefully. Then he said:

"I understood you to say that the Thing, as you call it, is still at large?"

The incredible possible implication of this statement of the disappearance of the "growth" removed from Hellman's body and the doctor's question, stunned me for an instant. Could he possibly mean to imply —? I stared at him, blankly, for an instant.

"Yes," said I, "it is still at large, and poor Hellman is barricaded in his cabin. As I have told you, I have dressed those bites and gashes myself. He absolutely refuses to go to the hospital again. He lies there, muttering to himself, ash-gray with fear."

"Hm," vouchsafed Dr. Pelletier. "How big would you say the Thing is, Canevin, judging from your glimpse of it and the marks it leaves?"

"About the-size, say, of a rat," I answered, "and black. We had that one sight of it, that first night. Carswell and I both saw

it scuttering out of Hellman's cabin right under our feet when this horrible business first started."

Dr. Pelletier nodded, slowly. Then he made another remark, apparently irrelevant:

"I had breakfast this morning on board the *Grebe*. Could you give me lunch?" He looked at his watch.

"Of course," I returned. "Are you thinking of . . . ?"

"Let's get going," said Dr. Pelletier, heaving himself to his feet.

WE STARTED at once, the doctor calling out to his servants that he would not be back for one o'clock "breakfast," and Stephen Penn who had driven us up the hill drove us down again. Arrived at my house we proceeded straight to Hellman's cabin. Dr. Pelletier talked soothingly to the poor fellow while examining those ugly wounds. On several he placed fresh dressings from his professional black bag. When he had finished he drew me outside.

"You did well, Canevin," he remarked, reflectively, "in not calling in anybody, dressing those wounds yourself! What people don't know, er — won't hurt 'em!"

He paused after a few steps away from the cabin.

"Show me," he commanded, "which way the Thing ran, that first night."

I indicated the direction, and we walked along the line of it, Pelletier forging ahead, his black bag in his big hand. We reached the corner of the cabin in a few steps, and Pelletier glanced up the alleyway between the cabin's side and the high yard-wall. The little toy house, looking somewhat dilapidated now, still stood where it had been, since I first discovered it. Pelletier did not enter the alleyway. He looked in at the queer little miniature hut.

"Hm," he remarked, his forehead puckered into a thick frowning wrinkle. Then, turning abruptly to me:

"I suppose it must have occurred to you that the Thing lived in that," said he, challengingly.

"Yes — naturally; after it went for my fingers — whatever *that* creature may have been. Three or four times I've gone in there with a flashlight after one of the attacks on Brutus Hellman; picked it up, even and looked inside . . ."

"And the Thing is never there," finished Dr. Pelletier, nodding sagaciously.

"Never," I corroborated.

"Come on up to the gallery," said the doctor, "and I'll tell you what I think."

## X

WE PROCEEDED to the gallery at once and Dr. Pelle-

tier, laying down his black bag, caused a lounge-chair to groan and creak beneath his recumbent weight while I went into the house to command the usual West Indian preliminary to a meal.

A few minutes later Dr. Pelletier told me what he thought, according to his promise. His opening remark was in the form of a question; about the very last question anyone in his senses would have regarded as pertinent to the subject in hand.

"Do you know anything about twins, Canevin?" he inquired.

"Twins?" said I. "Twins!" I was greatly puzzled. I had not been expecting any remarks about twins.

"Well," said I, as Dr. Pelletier stared at me gravely, "only what everybody knows about them, I imagine. What about them?"

"There are two types of twins, Canevin — and I don't mean the difference arising out of being separate or attached-at-birth, the 'Siamese' or ordinary types. I mean something far more basic than that accidental division into categories; more fundamental — deeper than that kind of distinction. The two kinds of twins I have reference to are called in biological terminology 'monozygotic' and 'dizygotic', respectively; those which originate, that is, from one cell, or from two."

"The distinction," I threw in, "which Johannes Lange makes

in his study of criminal determinism, his book, *Crime and Destiny*. The one-cell-originated twins, he contends, have identical motives and personalities. If one is a thief, the other has to be! He sets out to prove — and that pompous ass, Haldane, who wrote the foreword, believes it, too — that there is no free-will; that man's moral course is predetermined, inescapable — a kind of scientific Calvinism."

"Precisely, just that," said Dr. Pelletier. "Anyhow, you understand that distinction." I looked at him, still somewhat puzzled.

"YES," SAID I, "but still, I don't see its application to this nasty business to Brutus Hellman."

"I was leading up to telling you," said Dr. Pelletier, in his matter-of-fact, forthright fashion of speech; "to telling you, Canevin, that the Thing is, undoubtedly, the parasitic, 'Siamese-twin' that I cut away from Brutus Hellman last Thursday morning, and which disappeared out of the operating-room. Also from the evidence, I'd be inclined to think it is of the 'dizygotic' type. That would not occur, in the case of 'attached' twins, more than once in ten million times!"

He paused at this and looked at me. For my part, after that amazing, that utterly incredible statement, so calmly made, so dispassionately uttered, I could

do nothing but sit limply in my chair and gaze woodenly at my guest. I was so astounded that I was incapable of uttering a word. But I did not have to say anything.. Dr. Pelletier was speaking again, developing his thesis.

"Put together the known facts, Canevin. It is the scientific method, the only satisfactory method, when you are confronted with a situation like this one. You can do so quite easily, almost at random, here. To begin with, you never found the Thing in that little thatched hut after one of its attacks — did you?"

"No," I managed to murmur out of a strangely dry mouth. Pettetier's theory held me stupefied by its unexpectedness, its utter, weird strangeness. The name, "Cassius", smote my brain. That identical blood . . .

"If the Thing had been, say a rat," he continued, "as you supposed when it went for your fingers, it would have gone straight from its attacks on Brutus Hellman to its diggings — the refuge-instinct; 'holing-up.' But it didn't. You investigated several times and it wasn't inside the little house, although it ran towards it, as you believed, after seeing it start that way the first night; although the creature that went for your hand was there, inside, before it suspected pursuit. You see? That gives us a lead, a clue. The Thing possesses a much higher level of intelli-

gence than that of a mere rodent. Do you grasp that significant point, Canevin? The Thing, anticipating pursuit, avoided capture by instinctively out-guessing the pursuer. It went towards its diggings but deferred entrance until the pursuer had investigated and gone away. Do you get it?"

I NODDED, not desiring to interrupt. I was following Pelletier's thesis eagerly now. He resumed:

"Next—consider those wounds, those bites, on Brutus Hellman. They were never made by any small, ground-dwelling animal, a rodent, like a rat or a mongoose. No; those teeth-marks are those of — well, say, a marmoset or any very small monkey; or, Canevin, *of an unbelievably small human being!*"

Pelletier and I sat and looked at each other. I think that, after an appreciable interval, I was able to nod my head in his direction. Pelletier continued.

"The next point we come to — before going on to something a great deal deeper, Canevin — is the *color* of the Thing. You saw it: It was only a momentary glimpse, as you say, but you secured enough of an impression to seem pretty positive on that question of its color. Didn't you?"

"Yes," said I, slowly. "It was as black as a derby hat, Pelletier."

"There you have one point

definitely settled, then." The doctor was speaking with a judicial note in his voice, the scientist in full stride now. "The well-established ethnic rule, the biological certainty in cases of miscegenation between Caucasians or quasi-Caucasians and the Negro or negroid types is that the offspring is never darker than the darker of the two parents. The 'black-baby' tradition, as a 'throw-back' being produced by mulatto or nearly Caucasian parents is a bugaboo, Canevin, sheer bosh! It doesn't happen that way. It *cannot* happen. It is a biological impossibility, my dear man. Although widely believed, that idea falls into the same category as the ostrich burying its head in the sand and thinking it is concealed! It falls in with the Amazon myth! The 'Amazons' were merely long-haired Scythians, those 'women-warriors' of antiquity. Why, damn it, Canevin, it's like believing in the Centaur to swallow a thing like that."

THE DOCTOR had become quite excited over his expression of biological orthodoxy. He glared at me, or appeared to, and lighted a fresh cigarette. Then, considering for a moment, while he inhaled a few preliminary puffs, he resumed:

"You see what that proves, don't you, Canevin?" he inquired, somewhat more calmly now.

"It seems to show," I answer-

ed, "since Brutus is very 'clear-colored,' as the Negroes would say, that one of his parents was a black; the other very considerably lighter, perhaps even a pure Caucasian."

"Right, so far," acquiesced the doctor. "And the other inference, in the case of twins — what?"

"That the twins were 'dizygotic,' even though attached," said I, slowly, as the conclusion came clear in my mind after Pelletier's preparatory speech. "Otherwise, of course, if they were the other kind, the mono-cellular or 'monozygotic', they would have the same coloration, derived from either the dark or the light-skinned parent."

"Precisely," exclaimed Dr. Pelletier. "Now . . ."

"You mentioned certain other facts," I interrupted, "'more deep-seated,' I think you said. What . . ."

"I was just coming to those, Canevin. There are, actually, two such considerations which occur to me. First — why did the Thing degenerate, undoubtedly after birth, of course, if there were no prenatal process of degeneration? They would have been nearly of a size, anyway, when born, I'd suppose. Why did It shrink up into a withered, apparently lifeless little homunculus, while its fellow twin, Brutus Hellman, attained to a normal manhood?

There are some pretty deep matters involved in those queries, Canevin. It was comatose, shrunken, virtually dead while attached."

"Let's see if we can't make a guess at them," I threw in.

"What would *you* say?" countered Dr. Pelletier.

I NODDED, and sat silently for several minutes trying to put what was in my mind together in some coherent form so as to express it adequately. Then:

"A couple of possibilities occur to me," I began. "One or both of them might account for the divergence. First, the failure of one or more of the ductless glands, very early in the Thing's life after birth. It's the thymus gland, isn't it, that regulates the physical growth of an infant — that makes him grow normally. If that fails before it has done its full work, about the end of the child's second year, you get a midget. If, on the other hand, it keeps on too long — does not dry up as it should, and cease functioning, its normal task finished — the result is a giant; the child simply goes on growing, bigger and bigger! Am I right, so far? And, I suppose, the cutting process released it from its coma."

"Score one!" said Dr. Pelletier, wagging his head at me. "Go on — what else? There are many cases, of course, of blood-letting ending a coma."

"The second guess is that Brutus had the stronger constitution, and outstripped the other one. It doesn't sound especially scientific, but that sort of thing does happen as I understand it. Beyond those two possible explanations I shouldn't care to risk any more guesses."

"I think both those causes have been operative in this case," said Dr. Pelletier, reflectively. "And, having performed that operation, you see, I think I might add a third, Canevin. It is purely conjectural. I'll admit that frankly, but one outstanding circumstance supports it. In short, Canevin, I imagine — my instinct tells me — that almost from the beginning, quite unconsciously, of course, and in the automatic processes of outstripping his twin in physical growth, *Brutus absorbed the other's share of nutriments.*

"I CAN FIGURE that out, in fact, from several possible angles. The early nursing, for instance! The mother — she was, undoubtedly, the black parent — proud of her 'clear' child, would favor it, nurse it first. There is, besides, always some more or less obscure interplay, some balanced adjustment, between physically attached twins. In this case, God knows how, that invariable 'balance' became disadjusted; the adjustment became unbalanced, if you prefer it that way. The mother, too, from

whose side the dark twin probably derived its constitution, may very well have been a small, weakly woman. The fair-skinned other parent was probably robust, physically. But, whatever the underlying causes, we know that Brutus grew up to be normal and fully mature, and I know, from that operation, that the Thing I cut away from him was his twin brother, degenerated into an apparently lifeless homunculus, a mere appendage of Brutus, something which, *apparently, had quite lost nearly everything of its basic humanity;* even most of its appearance, Canevin — a Thing to be removed surgically, like a wen."

"It is a terrible idea," said I, slowly, and after an interval. "But, it seems to be the only way to explain er — the facts! Now tell me, if you please, what is that 'outstanding circumstance' you mentioned which corroborates this, er — theory of yours."

"It is the Thing's *motive*, Canevin," said Dr. Pelletier, very gravely, "allowing, of course, that we are right — that I am right — in assuming for lack of a better hypothesis that what I cut away from Hellman had life in it; that it 'escaped'; that it is now — well, in trying to get at a thing like that, under the circumstances, I'd be inclined to say, we touch bottom!"

"Good God — the *motive!*" I almost whispered. "Why, its horrible, Pelletier; its positively

uncanny. The thing becomes, quite definitely, a horror. The motive — in that Thing! You're right, old man. Psychologically speaking, it 'touches bottom,' as you say."

"And humanly speaking," added Dr. Pelletier, in a very quiet voice.

STEPHEN CAME out and announced breakfast. It was one o'clock. We went in and ate rather silently. As Stephen was serving the dessert, Dr. Pelletier spoke to him:

"Was Hellman's father a white man, do you happen to know, Stephen?"

"De man was an engineer on board an English trading vessel, sar."

"What about his mother?" probed the doctor.

"Her a resident of Antigua, sar," replied Stephen promptly, "and is yet alive. I am acquainted with her. Hellman ahways send her some portion of his earnings, sar, very regularly. At de time Hellman born, her a 'ooman which do washing for ships' crews, an' make an excellent living. Nowadays, de poor soul liddle more than a piteous invalid, sar. Her ahways a small liddle 'ooman, not too strong."

"I take it she is a dark woman?" remarked the doctor, smiling at Stephen.

Stephen, who is a medium brown young man, a "Zambo," as they say in the English Is-

lands like St. Kitts and Montserrat and Antigua, grinned broadly at this, displaying a set of magnificent, glistening teeth.

"Sar," he replied, "Hellman' mother de precisely identical hue of dis fella," and Stephen touched with his index finger the neat black bow-tie which set off the snowy whiteness of his immaculate drill house-man's jacket. Pelletier and I exchanged glances as we smiled at Stephen's little joke.

ON THE GALLERY immediately after lunch, over coffee, we came back to that bizarre topic which Dr. Pelletier had called the "motive." Considered quite apart from the weird aspect of attributing a motive to a quasi-human creature of the size of a rat, the matter was clear enough. The Thing had relentlessly attacked Brutus Hellman again and again, with an implacable fiendishness; its brutal, single-handed efforts being limited in their disastrous effects only by its diminutive size and relative deficiency of strength. Even so, it had succeeded in driving a full-grown man, its victim, into a condition not very far removed from imbecility.

What obscure processes had gone on piling up cumulatively to a fixed purpose of pure destruction in that primitive, degenerated organ that served the Thing for a brain! What dreadful weeks and months and years

of semi-conscious brooding, of existence endured parasitically as an appendage upon the instinctively loathed body of the normal brother! What savage hatred had burned itself into that minute, distorted personality! What incalculable instincts, deep buried in the backgrounds of the heredity through the mother, had come into play — as evidenced by the Thing's construction of the typical African hut as its habitation — once it had come, after the separation, into active consciousness, the new-born, freshly-realized freedom to exercise and release all that acrid, seething hatred upon him who had usurped its powers of self-expression, its very life itself! What manifold thwarted instincts had, by the process of substitution, crystallized themselves into one overwhelming, driving desire — the consuming instinct for revenge!

I shuddered as all this clarified itself in my mind, as I formed, vaguely, some kind of mental image of that personality. Dr. Pelletier was speaking again. I forced my engrossed mind to listen to him.

"We must put an end to all this, Canevin," he was saying. "Yes, we must put an end to it."

## XI

EVER SINCE that first Sunday evening when the attacks began, as I look back over that

hectic period, it seems to me that I had had in mind primarily the idea of capture and destruction of what had crystallized in my mind as "The Thing." Now a new and totally bizarre idea came in to cause some mental conflict with the destruction element in that vague plan. This was the almost inescapable conviction that the Thing had been originally — whatever it might be properly named now — a human being. As such, knowing well, as I did, the habits of the blacks of our Lesser Antilles, it had, unquestionably, been received into the church by the initial process of baptism. That indescribable creature which had been an appendage on Brutus Hellman's body, had been, *was now*, according to the teaching of the church, a Christian. The idea popped into my mind along with the various other sidelights on the situation, stimulated into being by the discussion with Dr. Pelletier which I have just recorded.

The idea itself was distressing enough, to one who, like myself, have always kept up the teachings of my own childhood, who has never found it necessary, in these days of mental unrest, to doubt, still less to abandon, his religion. One of the concomitants of this idea was that the destruction of the Thing after its problematical capture, would be an awkward affair upon my conscience, for, however

far departed the Thing had got from its original status as "A child of God — an Inheritor of The Kingdom of Heaven," it must retain, in some obscure fashion, its human, indeed its Christian, standing. There are those, doubtless, who might well regard this scruple of mine as quite utterly ridiculous, who would lay all the stress on the plain necessity of stopping the Thing's destructive malignancy without reference to any such apparently far-fetched and artificial considerations. Nevertheless this aspect of our immediate problem, Pelletier's gravely enunciated dictum: "We must put an end to all this," weighed heavily on my burdened mind. It must be remembered that I had put in a dreadful week over the affair.

I mention this "scruple" of mine because it throws up into relief, in a sense, those events which followed very shortly after Dr. Pelletier had summed up what necessarily lay before us, in that phrase of his.

WE SAT ON the gallery and cogitated ways and means, and it was in the midst of this discussion that the scruple alluded to occurred to me. I did not mention it to Pelletier. I mentally conceded, of course, the necessity of capture. The subsequent disposal of the Thing could wait on that.

We had pretty well decided,

on the evidence, that the Thing had been lying low during the day in the little hut-like arrangement which it appeared to have built for itself. Its attacks so far had occurred only at night. If we were correct, the capture would be a comparatively simple affair. There was, as part of the equipment in my house, a small bait net, of the circular, closing-in-from-the-bottom kind, used occasionally when I took guests on a deep-sea fishing excursion out to Congo or Levango Bays. This I unearthed, and looked over. It was intact, recently mended, without any holes in the tightly meshed netting designed to capture and retain small fish to be used later as live bait.

Armed with this, our simple plan readily in mind, we proceeded together to the alleyway about half-past two that afternoon, or, to be more precise, we were just at the moment starting down the gallery steps leading into my yard, when our ears were assailed by a succession of piercing, childish screams from the vicinity of the house's rear.

I rushed down the steps, four at a time, the more unwieldy Pelletier following me as closely as his propulsive apparatus would allow. I was in time to see, when I reached the corner of the house, nearly everything that was happening, almost from its beginning. It was a scene which, reproduced in a drawing

accurately limned, would appear wholly comic. Little Aesculapius, the washer's small, black child, his eyes popping nearly from his head, his diminutive black legs twinkling under his single flying garment, his voice uttering blood-curdling yowls of pure terror, raced diagonally across the yard in the direction of his mother's washtub near the kitchen door, the very embodiment of crude, ungovernable fright, a veritable caricature, a figure of fun.

AND BEHIND him, coming on implacably, for all the world like a misshapen black frog, bounded the Thing, in hot pursuit, its red tongue lolling out of its gash of a mouth, its diminutive blubbery lips drawn back in a wide snarl through which a murderous row of teeth flashed viciously in the pouring afternoon sunlight. Little Aesculapius was making good the promise of his relatively long, thin legs, fright driving him. He outdistanced the Thing hopelessly, yet It forged ahead in a rolling, leaping series of bounds, using hands and arms, frog-like, as well as its strange, withered, yet strangely powerful bandied legs.

The sight, grotesque as it would have been to anyone unfamiliar with the Thing's history and identity, positively sickened me. My impulse was to cover my face with my hands, in the realization of its underlying

horror. I could feel a faint nausea creeping over me, beginning to dim my senses. My washwoman's screams had added to the confusion within a second or two after those of the child had begun, and now, as I hesitated in my course towards the scene of confusion, those of the cook and scullery-maid were added to the cacophonous din in my back yard. Little Aesculapius, his garment stiff against the breeze of his own progress, disappeared around the rear-most corner of the house to comparative safety through the open kitchen door. He had, as I learned sometime afterwards, been playing about the yard and had happened upon the little hut in its obscure and seldom-visited alleyway. He had stooped, intrigued by this unusual plaything, and picked it up. "The Thing" — the child used that precise term to describe it — lay, curled up, asleep within. It had leaped to its splayed feet with a snarl of rage, and gone straight for the little Negro's foot.

Thereafter the primitive instinct for self-preservation and Aesculapius' excellent footwork had solved his problem. He reached the kitchen door, around the corner and out of our sight, plunged within, and took immediate refuge atop the shelf of a kitchen cabinet well out of reach of that malignant, unheard-of demon like a big black frog which was pursuing him

and which, doubtless, would haunt his dreams for the rest of his existence. So much for little Aesculapius, who thus happily passes out of the affair.

MY HALTING WAS, of course, only momentary. I paused, as I have mentioned, but for so brief a period as not to allow Dr. Pelletier to catch up with me. I ran, then, with the net open in my hands, diagonally across the straight course being pursued by the Thing. My mind was made up to intercept It, entangle It in the meshes. This should not be difficult considering its smallness and the comparative shortness of Its arms and legs; and, having rendered It helpless, to face the ultimate problem of Its later disposal.

But this plan of mine was abruptly interfered with. Precisely as the flying body of the pursued pick'ny disappeared around the corner of the house, my cook's cat, a ratter with a neighborhood reputation — and now, although for the moment I failed to realize it, quite clearly an instrument of that Providence responsible for my "scruple!" — came upon the scene with violence, precision, and that uncanny accuracy which actuates the feline in all its physical manifestations.

This avatar, which, according to a long-established custom, had been sunning itself demurely on the edge of the rain-water pip-

ing which ran along the low eaves of the three yard cabins, aroused by the discordant yells of the child and the three women in four distinct keys, had arisen, taken a brief, preliminary stretch, and condescended to turn its head towards the scene below. . . .

The momentum of the cat's leap arrested instantaneously the Thing's course of pursuit, bore it, sprawled out and flattened, to the ground, and twenty sharp powerful retractile claws sank simultaneously into the prone little body.

THE THING never moved again. A more merciful snuffing out would be difficult to imagine.

It was a matter of no difficulty to drive Junius, the cat, away from his kill. I am on terms of pleasant intimacy with Junius. He allowed me to take the now limp and flaccid little body away from him quite without protest, and sat down where he was, licking his paws and readjusting his rumpled fur.

And thus, unexpectedly, without intervention on our part, Pelletier and I saw brought to its sudden end, the tragical dénouement of what seems to be one of the most outlandish and most distressing affairs which could ever have been evolved out of the mad mentality of Satan, who dwells in his own place to distress the children of men.

And that night, under a flag-stone in the alleyway, quite near where the Thing's strange habitation had been taken up, I buried the mangled leathery little body of that unspeakably grotesque homunculus which had once been the twin brother of my house-man, Brutus Hellman. In consideration of my own scruple which I have mentioned,

and because, in all probability, this handful of strange material which I lowered gently into its last resting-place had once been a Christian, I repeated the Prayer of Committal from the Book of Common Prayer. It may have been — doubtless was, in one sense — a grotesque act on my part. But I cherish the conviction that I did what was right.

Dr. Whitehead wrote several books for the lay Christian, but he is most widely known, of course, as an author of weird stories. August Derleth says, "His work in the genre of the weird is outstanding, for Dr. Whitehead wrote as a realist, he liked form and the beauty of order, and these qualities are strikingly manifest in his work." While two collections of his stories have been published by Arkham House, these do not include all of them.

Several other titles have been nominated by you, the readers: "The Trap", "The Black Beast", and "Black Terror". We invite those of you who would like to see more of Dr. Whitehead's tales either to vote for one of these three titles, or to nominate some other story of his that you would rather see. We shall be guided by a plurality vote in this matter; and, of course, if a title other than one of the above three comes out in front, then the first reader to have nominated that title will receive our special thanks.

# *Love At First Sight*

*by J. L. Miller*

When requested for vital statistics, J. L. Miller acknowledged to twenty-four years' existence, the acquisition of a B.A. from Pomona College, an M.A. from Indiana University (both in English) and a wife admirably employed as high school economics teacher. His poetry has appeared in several literary journals, and he had done book reviews for the Louisville *COURIER-JOURNAL*; this is his debut in fiction.

EDWARD REISER, holding tightly to the steering wheel for support as his Cadillac lurched from pothole to pothole, cursed angrily at the twisting, rutted, squirrel track of a mountain road that he could scarcely see through his dust-covered windshield. When he tired of cursing the road, he cursed himself for being such a fool. The whole thing, he knew, would be a hoax. Such things were merely old wives' tales. But what alternative did he have? he asked himself. He had already tried everything else.

Edward was so intent upon his anger that he missed the shack and had to back up to it. He waited for a while to let the dust cloud dissipate before he opened his car door and stepped out.

An ancient, shapeless woman in an ancient, shapeless dress stepped out of the shack onto the front porch to greet him.  
"How do?" she croaked out.  
"How do?"

"Are you the person they call Aunt Hattie?" he asked.  
"Yep," she answered, beckon-

ing him to come inside. "Come on in. Come on in."

Edward went inside with a good many misgivings, and the interior of the shack gave him no comfort. The oppressively small room he was led to had only two real pieces of furniture — a worn and sagging couch and an equally worn and sagging easy chair. The rest of the room was filled with tables made of old packing crates and covered with the jars and cages that contained Hattie's "equipment" — spiders, snakes, bats, and the usual assortment of creatures that witches find necessary. The walls were unpainted, and the room had apparently never been cleaned. The floors were stained with tobacco juice.

Edward looked about with loathing. Nonetheless, he had come on business, and he was not the sort of man to let small obstacles like personal distaste get in his way.

"Well, well," Hattie cackled happily, "it's not of'en I git a chance to visit with a good-lookin' young feller like yerse'f. Set down a spell."

"I didn't come to chat," replied Edward firmly, trying to be business-like while feeling rather absurd. "I'm here on business. I... well, I understand that you can make a certain potion..."

"Make all kinds of potions,

Honey," she interrupted. "What kind you want?"

Edward glanced around surmisingly, as if he were making a fool of himself before an unseen audience.

"A love potion," he said.

The old woman cackled delightedly, almost ecstatically.

"Well, well, well. So you want the love potion," she finally said, cackling some more. "Well, I kain't blame you. Nosirree, kain't blame you fer wantin' that. Git the itch sometimes, muhse'f. Course it don't do *me* much good to itch. When I was young, now, they use to come runnin'. Couldn't git away from 'em. Oh, they won't leave you alone when yer young; but when yer old . . ."

She shook her head sadly.

"But whut's a han'some feller like yerse'f need a potion fer?" she asked coyly. "Seems to me the wimmen ought to be wantin' it to use on you."

"Never mind why I want it," he returned rather gruffly. "Just give it to me and I'll pay and leave."

"Oh, don't git in no hurry. Ain't of'en I git visitors. Tell me 'bout yerse'f, an' . . ."

"No, thank you," said Edward. "If you'll give me the potion, I'll be going."

"Well, well," she said placatingly, "if yer in a hurry, Dearie, I'll see 'bout gittin' it started. It'll take a while to fix, though."

HATTIE ROSE from the chair and hobbled to the door at the end of the room. She carefully closed the door behind her and Edward was alone, seated gingerly on the dilapidated couch and feeling as though his expensively tailored suit was being tainted.

The witch had, of course, been right about Edward's attractiveness to women. A combination of good looks, technique, and inherited money had made him a phenomenally successful lover. At the age of thirty-two, he had already been loved passionately by more women than he cared to, or even could, remember. He had, in fact, begun to grow rather bored with women and what he often called "that bedroom part of life."

And then he had met Rita. Rita was perfect. Young, beautiful, intelligent, vivacious . . . the English language could scarcely do her justice. She was working as a secretary to Edward's lawyer when he met her, and as soon as he saw her, he was interested. But for the first time in his life he had encountered a woman who was completely *uninterested* in him.

She had turned down his request for a date, explaining that she was engaged to a young architect, and would be married just as soon as her fiancee was

able to make a suitable salary. He began visiting his lawyer every day in order to see her more often. She changed jobs and went to work for a different lawyer. He changed lawyers. She left that job for another with a large company. He called her on the phone until she refused to answer it any more. He rang her doorbell until she called the police. What had been mere interest had become, by degrees, an obsessive passion. He lost his appetite and took to hanging around bars in the melancholy of long afternoons.

It was during one of these afternoons that he had overheard a rough-looking young man in work clothes telling his companion about a witch who lived near his home-town in Kentucky, and who could cast spells and make potions — love potions, for instance.

A bit of money persuaded the young man to tell Edward more about the witch and the love potion. Edward, of course, did not believe in love potions. Still, it gave him something to think about during those endless, alcoholic afternoons. After all, everything else had failed. And in his desperation, Edward had begun that long drive to Kentucky.

THE OLD woman re-entered the room, slamming the door

and waking Edward from his reverie.

"Won't be long now," she croaked, grinning toothlessly. "Jest needs to settle a bit. Like a cup of tea?"

"No," Edward shuddered, deeply repulsed by the idea of sitting and drinking tea with the old hag, as though they were having a social hour together.

"Then how 'bout a glass of nice, cool well water, Dearie," she asked. "It must've been a hot, dusty drive up here."

Edward was parched with thirst, partly from the drive and partly from nervousness. So he gladly agreed, feeling that even she wouldn't be able to turn a glass of water into a social occasion.

Hattie hobbled out the door and soon returned with a glass of water for him. He took it gratefully and drank half of it with his first gulp. It tasted a bit brackish, but it felt good to his dry throat.

"Don't s'pose a city feller like yerse'f really believes in love potions," she said.

"Well, no, of course not."

"No, of course not," she sighed. "No one does anymore. Not even the hill people. But you come anyway. You come. Not so many as use to, though. Gits real lonely, nowadays. Ever since Old Sallie died . . ."

"The potion," Edward interrupted, trying to cut off her tiresome rambling. "Just how does it work?"

"Well, it's liquid, you see. You kin give it in a glass of whiskey or somethin' if you want. Whoiver drinks it will fall in love with the first person they see after it takes holt."

"How deeply in love?" asked Edward anxiously, thinking of the fiancee. "Will they give up previous obligations?"

"Yep," she said. "Give up ev'er-thin' 'cept bein' in love."

"I understand," said Edward. "Now, how long does it take before it becomes effective?"

"Minnut er two," she said.

"Oh, yes — does it have any taste that will have to be disguised?"

"It tastes," she said slowly. "a bit like brackish water."

"Brack . . ."

But even before he could be sure of what had happened, Edward's anger had changed into an entirely different emotion — one which he had never experienced before. The haggish cackling had become full-throated, sexily feminine laughter. Edward stood very still for a long moment, too overcome by the new emotion to act. Then he stepped forward and gathered his beloved in his arms.

# Five-Year Contract

by J. Vernon Shea

"My father," writes J. Vernon Shea, "was both a professional photographer and professional magician, numbering among his friends Hermann the Great, Thurston, Houdini, and Blackstone. He toured the country for fifteen years as part of the act of Shea and Lang. He did the illusions, Lang the card tricks." The elder Shea brought home a copy of the first issue of WEIRD TALES, in 1923, and J. Vernon purchased the first issue of AMAZING STORIES, in 1926, so we can see that that first issue of WT took root in fertile soil. J. Vernon became a member of the "Lovecraft Circle" in 1931, and corresponded with HPL from that time until Lovecraft's death in 1937. He started to write — fantasy, of course — at the age of 14, but except for occasional appearances in the "little magazines" with short stories, poems, and articles did not make an appearance until 1954 when he edited an anthology, *Strange Desires*, for Lion Books. He lists other interests as films, plays, operas, concerts, ballets, and bridge; he has appeared in amateur theatricals. "To give your readers some idea of how old I am, you might mention that Gene Kelley was in the class *below* mine at Peabody High in Pittsburgh." However old the author may be, say we, he has nonetheless given us a new twist in the old story of a deal with Satan.

THE PARTY was beginning to drag. The latest off-color jokes had been snickered over; the women had sucked out the last bit of juice from the neighbor-

hood gossip; the men had discussed all they were willing to disclose of their business ventures; baseball scores had been wrangled over; the latest es-

capades of national political figures had been savored; Winston Carr and Ted Johnston had tried on all the women's hats, and the guests were beginning to spill their drinks. John Williamson, the host, knew it was now time for Winston Carr, his brother-in-law, to try another exhibitionistic caper.

He had never discovered how Winston managed it, but Dorothy Carr always picked up her husband's cut.

"I don't suppose any of you heard Rubinstein last week?" she said brightly, and without waiting for an answer, continued, "He gave an all-Chopin program. It was simply fabulous. We especially liked the *Ballade*. Do you remember how it goes?"

"No," the guests disclaimed.

"Win can give you some idea of how it goes if you care to hear it."

"Oh, yes, do, Win, by all means!" breathed Caroline Williamson, John's wife. John knew that Caroline knew that Winston had been practicing the piece all week in order to spring an "impromptu" performance.

"I'm no Rubinstein, as you all know," began Winston, "but . . ."

"Yes, we know," said John Williamson dryly.

Caroline flashed him a warning glance.

Winston gave John a quizzical look, but Win was not easily daunted. He went over to the Baby Grand and warmed up by

giving his usual imitation of eccentric pianists that combined the worst features of Serkin, Gould, and Borge. Then he tossed back his hair in the manner of Rubinstein and launched into the *Ballade*.

Carr's playing was undeniably competent. He had studied at conservatories for years and at one time his playing had been considered almost of concert caliber. Almost — but not quite. It had been one of the few defeats of Carr's career. Williamson had always been impressed by his brother-in-law's playing, in spite of himself. He had envied Winston's technical command. But now, with his newly-acquired sensitivity, his inner ear told him things about Winston's playing he had never heard before. He winced at wrong notes, misplayed arpeggios, lyrical passages played in a bravura manner. He surprised himself by considering a sudden impulse to push Winston off the stool and play the passage properly himself. Well, why not?

WHEN HE HAD finished, Winston with assumed modesty waited for the applause.

It came, a little too thunderous, a little too unprolonged.

"Wonderful, Win," Caroline said. "Didn't you think so, John?"

"It wasn't bad," John acknowledged. "But I'm sure that Rub-

insein would never have played it that way."

"No?" said Winston belligerently. "I suppose you could play it better" he asked, with an appreciative wink at the crowd.

"I might just do that," said John Williamson quietly.

There was a collective gasp from the crowd as John seated himself at the piano.

"Knock it off, John," said Winston Carr in an exasperated tone.

"Can he really play, Caroline?" whispered Della Johnston.

"If you call Chopsticks playing," Caroline answered. "He never had a lesson in his life."

John Williamson was enjoying himself hugely. He could sense the wolfish fangs behind the set smiles of his guests. They were tensed for a victim. He adjusted the piano stool with unnecessary elaborations, flexed his fingers — and blew his nose loudly.

"Knock it off, John," repeated Winston Carr. "The joke's gone on long enough."

"What joke?" John queried innocently. "I thought we were discussing *music*. I think the *Ballade* should go something like this."

His fingers descended upon the keys.

It was the acid test. Would the stranger fail him now?

The stranger didn't. The notes sounded out full-toned and *right*. The stiffness departed magically from his fingers. They were ready almost before the

signal from his brain, fingers that seemed to strike the notes with a will of their own. They almost frightened him by their diabalerie; it was impossible for him to be playing this way.

His guests looked stunned. They were gathered unbelievably about the piano. Instead of the cacophony they had expected, John was repeating the notes Winston had played — but playing them infinitely better, with the crisp tones of the practiced concert pianist.

"I don't believe it," Winston said. He was visibly shaken.

"You've been holding out on us," said Ted Johnston. "Where did you ever learn to play like that?" John held up a dissuading hand, then continued with the *Ballade*.

The lyrical passages sounded out with the proper lyricism. Winston Carr looked startled as he detected the subtle differences in the approach. Caroline Williamson held her bulging eyes fixed directly at her husband's flying fingers, her face drained of color, her mouth gasping for air like a floundering fish.

WHEN HE finished, John Williamson sat back quietly upon the stool. The hubbub started immediately. Della Johnston said to Caroline, "Your husband's a marvelous player. Did he ever think of going on the concert stage?" And Dorothy

Carr said, "Do you know what? I don't know what? I don't know how he ever managed it, but he played it *exactly* the way Rubinstein did!" Her husband glared at her.

"How about another round of drinks, folks?" said John.

"You're not getting away that easily," Dorothy Carr said. "You've simply got to tell us how and where and when you learned to play."

"Don't think you're going to escape without playing more for us, old man," said Ted Johnston. "Me, I don't know anything about music, but I can tell when somebody's good."

John's triumph was the main subject of conversation for the rest of the evening.

"Where did you learn to play?" everyone asked.

"Never had a lesson in my life," John maintained stoutly.

No one believed him, insisting that he must have been taking lessons secretly for many years. He could see his wife regarding him with stupefaction and he knew that he was in for a long inquisition once the party had disbanded. After his first polite phrases, Winston Carr snapped at him for the rest of the evening. He looked at him with dogged eyes, as if his little brother-in-law had grown a full ten inches taller. Winston had one of the worst evenings of his life.

The Carrs were the last guests to leave. "By the way,

John," Winston said, "it's time your car needed overhauling. I think I'd better have a look at it."

"O. K.," said John.

John knew that Winston needed something to salvage a measure of pride. John's inability to cope with anything mechanical was proverbial in the neighborhood. Any time something broke down, every time the car needed the slightest repairs, he always had to call upon his brother-in-law.

The swinging, unshaded bulb in the garage threw huge shadows. "That was a pretty cute little stunt you pulled tonight, John. I still don't know how you managed it."

"Oh, it was nothing, Win, nothing at all. After all, as you always say, 'If anybody else can do it, I can do it.' No, wait a moment, Win. I don't want you to get your clothes all messed up. I'll just slip into these coveralls and . . ."

He stopped as he observed the nonplussed expression upon Winston's face. Before Winston could stop him, John had donned the coveralls and slipped under the car. He was glad that Winston couldn't see the smile spreading across his face. After a moment he said, "You're right, Win, the old bus *does* need a bit of work. Hand me the toolbox, will you?"

"I hope you don't think you can fix it by yourself," said Winston Carr incredulously.

"Why not? If anybody else can do it, I can do it."

"This I'll have to see," answered Winston. He stayed in the garage for twenty more minutes, peering under the car from time to time to see what his brother-in-law was up to. When it became apparent even to him that by some strange alchemy John knew exactly what he was doing, he left the garage in somewhat of a huff, a thoroughly baffled man.

THE EXPLANATION was really very simple, John thought, but no one would believe it. Certainly not so hard-headed a realist as Winston Carr.

Caroline was the indirect cause. If she hadn't railed at him that night, throwing Winston up to him, he never would have been in the receptive frame of mind for what had happened.

Winston Carr had been a sore point with John Williamson ever since his marriage to Caroline. It was not just because as the top personnel man of a big corporation, Winston made more than twice John's salary, or that his personality was more colorful, his looks more dashing. John has resigned himself a long time ago to the fact that he was the sort of person at whom people seldom looked twice.

What really irked John Williamson about his brother-in-law was that he could *do* so

many things without apparent effort, while the simplest practical things presented almost insuperable obstacles to John. It was not that Winston had such a good mind; Williamson had always suspected that his own mind was better. But the world as it was constituted suited Winston precisely; he was as adaptable as a chameleon, and had the elastic scruples of the opportunist. His was an intensely practical mind, while Williamson's dwelled lovingly upon ideas for which there was no apparent practical need.

Winston's philosophy could be expressed in a single sentence: "If anybody else can do it, I can do it." It was not really true, of course; there were many realms of which Winston had no inkling; but for most practical purposes, it *was* true. When it came to a case, Winston always made good his boast.

John Williamson had been pondering these thoughts as he sat in a cheap cafeteria sipping his coffee. It was not the sort of place Winston would have patronized; his brother-in-law used credit cards at the most expensive restaurants. Winston! Everything came so easily to Winston that you might suspect that he had sold his soul to the devil for the privilege. Well, if he himself could accomplish things that readily, he would be willing to sell his soul, too.

"May I sit here?" the man asked.

"Go ahead," said John, a bit grudgingly.

There was nothing at all to distinguish the stranger. He had the sort of face you see a hundred times a day on the street and he was dressed just like everyone else. Williamson hardly granted him a glance.

Yet the stranger said something highly unusual. "You called me?" he asked, giving John a searching look.

"Called you? I don't know what you mean. I never saw you before in my life."

"Of course not. But you called, just the same."

John gave him a look of blank incomprehension. "Now, see here . . ."

"You were thinking about a contract. It so happens that I have one here in my pocket."

"I don't have the slightest idea of what you're talking about. Look, I don't have time for guessing games . . ."

"Here, look this over," interrupted the stranger, pulling a paper from the breast pocket of his coat. "It's the standard form. We'll modify it to suit your needs, of course."

"I don't know what . . ." John began again, but he picked up the paper out of curiosity.

It was a standard legal contract form, so far as appearances went. But John had read only

a few lines when he realized what kind of contract.

"You're kidding."

But he kept reading. It was disappointingly prosaic. He would have expected at least a parchment made of human skin, with archaic lettering and queer phrases — the sort of contract which must be signed in human blood.

IT WAS disappointingly prosaic, but oddly convincing. He read it through once, then again more slowly. Then he glanced up at the stranger. The stranger's face was now in shadow, but in the semi-darkness he could see eyes glowing.

"Then your — your *employer* is real, then?" he said. "I didn't think anybody today really be . . ."

"Oh, he's real enough, as you'll find out."

"You're not . . ."

"Don't flatter yourself. He has more important things to do with his time than . . ."

"I don't believe I'd care to meet the gentleman."

"Few people do. But he's very sociable, really. He gets to meet all the best people."

"Should I feel flattered? Really, I don't understand this sudden interest of his in me. It isn't that I'm at all outstanding. I'm sure he must get billions of souls just like mine — in the ordinary way, I mean, without any exertion upon his part."

"Don't belittle yourself, Mr. Williamson, just because your brother-in-law does."

"Oh, you know about Winston? One of your clients, perhaps? . . . You don't have to tell me, I was just wondering."

"Winston Carr? That information is classified, but I'll tell you this much if it'll make you feel any better. We aren't in the least interested in your brother-in-law. We have plenty of souls just like his."

"You mean you're certain to get him?"

"What do you think? . . . But to get to business. Just what is it you want of us, Mr. Williamson?"

"Just a simple request, if you're capable of granting it."

"Ah, Mr. Williamson, I see you're trying to be tricky. Let me warn you, we know all the tricks."

John felt a sudden chill. "Let me see," he said hastily. "My brother-in-law is always saying, 'If anybody else can do it, I can do it.' I'd like that to be literally true in my case. That is, I want to be able to do anything that anyone else has ever done before."

"Hmm," the stranger pondered. "That's a new one to me, and I thought I'd heard them all. On this one I'll have to consult someone higher up. I can tell you this much, Mr. Williamson, on that request there will have to be a lot of modifying clauses.

For one thing, we can't have you accumulating billions. The economy is unstable enough already. . . . And we won't let you perform miracles. The other side has a monopoly on *them*. And there will probably be a number of other restrictions which I'll have to take up with you later. I can see you're going to put our legal department to a lot of work," the stranger said, and he flashed John a look that seemed admiring. "Of course, you'll sign the usual five-year contract?"

"So short a time? I thought . . ."

"Really, Mr. Williamson, your soul isn't *that* valuable to us. In a full lifetime, given the powers you request, you could upset the balance of the world considerably. *Too* considerably. Our activities must not be suspected. . . . I'm not at all sure that Lucifer will be willing to make out such a contract. It'll put us to a great deal of trouble. . . . You're sure you don't want the usual things, plenty of money, power, wine, women, and song?"

"I'm sure."

The stranger bolted down the remainder of his food — Williamson noted that he had dripped something upon his tie, which somehow amused him — and got to his feet, picking up his cafeteria tab. "I'll see you here tomorrow then," he said casually, and departed.

ABOUT A WEEK after the

party, the Carrs and the Johnstons were with the Williamsons again, this time at a Saturday matinee at the circus. All their children were in attendance, trying to impress their parents with how thoroughly they were enjoying themselves, but hot and uncomfortable on their hard seats, restive and a bit glum. You could see that they would rather be at home watching TV. John looked down at his son, Stephen, watching the antics of the clowns with polite attention. "That big clown dressed up like a woman is funny, isn't he?" he asked.

"Yes, dad," Stephen answered unenthusiastically.

It was strange, John thought, how much glamor the circus had lost since he was a kid, sitting under the big tent with a box of popcorn in his hand. In those days he looked forward to the arrival of the circus for months beforehand, and could hardly sleep the night before with his head so full of the thoughts of the trapeze performers, the roaring lions, the huge elephants, the parade. Now everything seemed dispirited, even to him. Caroline beside him was saying to Gwen, their daughter, "Stop kicking the seat. Can't you see that man turning around and looking at you? If you don't behave, we'll have to take you home."

"Oh, could we, mother?" asked Gwen.

The clowns finished their

turn, and the circus hands were out immediately putting up the equipment and strengthening the ropes for the tight wire act. The wire walkers came out in their sequinned tights, bowing to the crowd, testing the ropes. Williamson watched with held attention. As a child, he had particularly envied the wire walkers their skill.

"You never saw your father walk the tight rope, did you, son?" he asked on a sudden impulse.

"Don't be silly, dad. You'd break your neck."

"Oh, you think I can't do it, huh?"

He stood up, Caroline cried, "John, where do you think you're going?" and Winston yelled, "John, you damn fool, come back here!"

Williamson pushed past the occupants of the other seats, stepping upon some toes in the process, and he picked his way carefully down the stairs in the darkened arena. He was confident that the stranger wouldn't let him trip or fall, but the sensation was eerie none the less.

The wire walkers were already out upon the wire, balancing themselves with poles, when he reached the tanbark. The circus attendants sought to restrain him, but he eluded their clutches and wiped his feet in the rosin box. "Come back here, you son of a bitch, you want to get yourself killed?" an attendant

cried at him as he started to climb up to the platform. He went up rapidly, forgetting that he had always been afraid of heights. The rope ladder chafed and cut into his hands.

"Go back! Go back!" someone on the platform was calling down to him.

He could feel the eyes of the crowd intent upon him. Except for his party, they thought it all part of the act. He would be expected to clown upon the wire. *What am I doing?* he thought. *I'm a damn fool.* But he kept ascending the rope ladder.

The wire walkers scurried across the wire and gathered in consulting groups upon either platform. This was a situation they had never encountered before. They were calling down to him, telling him to climb back down, cursing him for breaking up their routine. When he had almost reached the platform, one of the women there stepped upon his hands. She was pulled away from him by one of the men, who said, "Stop it, Lola! You want him to fall?" And he extended his hand to John, helped pull him up to the platform. "Look, mister," he said, "I don't know whether you're drunk or what, but you can't stay up here. Let us help you back down."

"What's the matter?" said John innocently. "I just came up for a little stroll."

"Well, you stroll right back where you came from."

The platform was crowded and incredibly small, and it swayed a little under his feet, and it seemed at least a thousand feet up from the ground. The gesticulating circus attendants down there looked like worried ants. Somewhere over there in that caught-up crowd was Caroline. His legs felt rubbery and collapsible, and his head was spinning.

"Mister, sit down, sit down." He obeyed mechanically. "You feel better now?"

He nodded wanly.

"Wait until the act is over, and we'll help you down."

He watched them as they continued their act. The wire looked like a thin strand lost in an infinity of space, and he saw how it gave under their feet. But then as he watched it seemed to strengthen, to expand, to become a broad highway, and suddenly he knew that the stranger was on his job. "If anybody else can do it, I can do it," he thought. It looked absurdly easy.

He got to his feet just as the wire walkers were coming off. "Mister, we told you to stay down." He ignored them. He placed one foot upon the wire tentatively. It gave way alarmingly, but his head felt clear and steady. He seized a balancing pole from one of the performers, who was too startled to try to

stop him. He stepped out again upon the wire. He inched forward, then placed his other foot out. There was no net down there, nothing to keep him from hurtling to his death but a thin wire, but he knew better than to look down. He moved his foot forward again. . . .

It seemed almost a year later when he returned to the stands. The people in his row made way for him uncomplainingly. His party was strangely quiet. Caroline looked at him as if she were afraid of him. . . .

"Daddy, daddy, you were wonderful!" Gwen cried.

Her mother slapped her viciously.

IT WAS TIME for some self-scrutiny, John Williamson thought as his party, somewhat chastened, somewhat embarrassed, scurried early from the circus. The congratulations he had expected were notably absent; his guests looked at him, when they couldn't avoid his eyes, as at a pet which has misbehaved in company. Winston Carr was blazing with anger, betrayed by that uncontrollable tic he had of rapidly blinking his eyes. The children, accepting the incomprehensible mood of their parents, were silent, although John noticed that Stephen was almost bursting with curiosity and pride and had slipped his moist palm into his father's, for the first time in many months.

He saw that his wife's lips were pursed and grim. There would have to be a reckoning with Caroline; things hadn't been going as he had expected at all. Yes, Caroline had expressed admiration for his so astoundingly acquired pianistic prowess — but it was touched with fear; Caroline knew very well, far better than his guests could, that he had no time for practicing — and such skill as he had shown is not obtained overnight except in wish-fulfillment dreams. Caroline knew there had to be some explanation; and when it was not forthcoming, the wall between them was further solidified.

The triumphs accomplished by diabolical intervention seemed in retrospect curiously unsatisfying. He had been betrayed by the vanity of the insecure into absurd exhibitionistic tricks. There was no sense of solid achievement: What he had done was empty because it was so facile. Was that all he would accomplish during the remainder of his five years — a series of parlor tricks? Why had he committed himself so irrevocably? Wasn't it only because of a petty pique against Winston? He recognized the truth of the stranger's casual dismissal of Winston Carr — he was not worthy of a complicated revenge; he had been toppled o'er like a tenpin. And to effect so childish an humiliation he had committed

his immortal soul. He felt shrivelled up all of a sudden, swept over by an Arctic wind — a soul forever lost, howling in the darkness.

A MONTH LATER John Williamson was a thoroughly frustrated man. It had occurred to him that it was time to put away puerile exhibitions and do something with his new powers that would be of benefit to humanity. Just what, though, it was difficult to decide. There were so many things that needed to be done, and so little time left in which to do them. He might, for instance, become a surgeon — but he had no medical knowledge or degree whatsoever, and the thought of cutting into human flesh and leaving his patients to the caprices of the devil's agent gave him pause; he could not risk the lives of others. Passing the Baby Grand one day, the scene of his first triumph, he was seized by a brilliant idea: he would become a composer. He purchased musical notation paper and set to work. Caroline was impressed in spite of herself and kept the children away while he was working. The symphony he was writing took him three weeks; the ideas seemed to come to him effortlessly.

When he had finished it, he took the work to the music critic on one of the local papers. The critic glanced through the

score, then looked up with an odd expression upon his face.

"That's a great symphony, Mr. Williamson," he said.

"You really think it's good?"

"I think it's *great*. But then, it always *was* great. Don't you recognize it, Mr. Williamson? It's the Beethoven Seventh."

It was then that John Williamson realized how he had been tricked. His contract specified that he would be able to do anything that anyone else had done *before*. That condition precluded any original creative activity upon his part; he could merely repeat endlessly what others had done *before* him.

The thought was completely dispiriting. He sat around the house for days in dejection. Curiously, the humbling experience brought Caroline close to him again; she welcomed the crushed little man back. She knew how to cope with him, as she had never learned to cope with the godlike figure he had tried to be, or the great lover experienced in the techniques of Casanova and Don Juan. He was his familiar self again.

And maybe it was possible to trick the tricksters. It would be a great boon to humanity if he could rediscover the treasures of the past lost in antiquity. Possibly he could rewrite the books lost in the burning of the great library at Alexandria, the plays of Euripides and Sophocles forever gone; maybe he could re-

paint the unknown Leonards and Michelangelos. He tried his hand.

As he was trying to compose something in Greek, there came a telephone call for him.

"Mr. Williamson," the voice said, "you know who this is."

"My friend from the cafeteria?"

"The same. Mr. Williamson, let me warn you. Apparently you haven't read your contract very carefully. You'll recall that there are some statutes of limitations. What you are trying to do is definitely a violation of the contract. You were warned that you would not be permitted to upset the balance of the world too considerably. If you persist in your attempts, we'll consider the contract abrogated, and you'll find yourself in a new and permanent abode."

John Williamson heard a click in the receiver.

A clipping from a news magazine:

Patrons of the Sands Hotel at Los Vegas were treated to an unprecedented incident last week.

The great Billy Johns blew his lines.

Midway in a song ("It Ain't Necessarily So," the famous number sung by Sportin' Life in Gershwin's folk opera, *Porgy and Bess*) Billy stopped, mopped his forehead,

glanced helplessly at his accompanist. The hushed crowd expected him to resume within a moment, but the diminutive singer stood still, seeming to make no attempt to flag his faltering memory.

The crowd waited for a quip from the resourceful showman, but instead he did a strange thing. An agonized expression upon his face, he cried out, "Are you there, God?"\* — and stalked out.

The Sands crowd has no explanation for the incident. He had not been disturbed by hecklers. Ever since he climbed upon the wagon six months ago, Billy's audiences have been warmer than ever. His salary has been mounting fantastically.\*\* It could not be said that he was in better voice, for the phenomenal entertainer has never been plagued by the vocal vicissitudes that beset lesser singers.

It was the first time within anyone's memory that Billy ever failed an audience. In a career that has been termed "fantastic" and "meteoric"\*\*\*

\*The climactic line of Philip Barry's expressionistic drama, *Here Come the Clowns* (1934), revived off-Broadway (1961).

\*\*Reportedly \$400,000 a week for his Sands engagement.

\*\*\*Forgetting that meteors fall toward Earth rather than shooting up into the sky.

the former office underling from New Haven, Conn. has risen faster than anyone in the history of show business. Offers poured in faster than he could accept. Perhaps the most versatile showman of them all (mimic, singer, dancer, juggler, tightrope walker, m o n o l o g i s t, pantomimist, pianist, conductor, director), Billy Johns (ne John Williamson) has starred in nightclubs, opera (two seasons at the Met in Caruso's old roles), Broadway shows (**How to Succeed With Women, An Evening With Billy Johns**) and in his own TV show in a period of slightly less than four years.

Show business buffs look to his private life for a possible explanation of Billy's breakdown. The devilish twinkle in his eyes, coupled ambivalently with a little-boy appeal, that has drawn hordes of eager starlets irresistibly to him apparently wasn't sufficient to check his marital breakup with the former Caroline Carr (ten years of marriage, two children) and the increasing dependence upon psychiatric help. Readers will recall the frequent alcohol lapses that checkered his career until medicos insisted that sparkling spring water be his main drink rather than sparkling Burgundy.

Will Billy be able to fulfill his engagements at Miami

Beach next week? Recalling his frequent boast ("If anyone else can do it, I can do it"), his fans await the outcome.

JOHN WILLIAMSON was not alone in his hotel room.

The stranger from the cafeteria was seated across from him. Williamson had difficulty in recognizing him. The familiar face seemed to be melting, and patches of another skin — which John didn't care to examine too closely — were showing through.

The stranger was saying, in a voice that was becoming harsher and deeper, with a brazen tone, "The time has come, John Williamson. I don't think we need indulge in melodrama, do you? If you'll just come quietly . . ."

"I'm not ready to go just yet," said John Williamson quietly.

"No one ever is," the stranger observed.

"I think you've provided me with a loophole. I've read the statute of limitations very carefully, and I fail to see why I can't use the escape clause."

"What escape clause?"

"You'll remember the agreement, that I would be enabled to do anything that anyone else has ever done *before*. Now I'm sure that at least one person — contradict me if I'm wrong — in all the long history of contracts with the devil has been enabled to escape from his con-

tract. Frankly, I don't know how he did it, but you can provide me with the method. That's *your job.*"

The stranger howled suddenly. He made as if to clutch Williamson with his hands — which were becoming more and more like claws — and then suddenly

stopped. He sat down, sullenly.

"You're right, John Williamson. *You win.* But your victory won't be pleasant, I can assure you. You'll have to go back to being the obscure person you were, with no special powers."

"Thank God," said John Williamson.

In reference to the two questions we have asked of you (1) would you like to see some science fiction tales which could legitimately be considered horror or strange stories (2) would you like to see an occasional article dealing with horror and strange subjects — not, of course, merely the gruesome true detective story type, your comments have been pretty well decisive on one of them. While few have said "do" or "don't" print science fiction, so many of you have asked for specific stories of the type that we have outlined above, that we cannot doubt a plurality is in favor. Thus the "coming next issue" page announces one such nomination; and while we do not promise to run a science-fiction type tale in each and every issue unless a plurality of you make it clear that this is your desire, you will see more in issues to come.

In reference to the second question, there simply have not been enough replies for us to make any sort of decision — except that of holding off the decision, so far as policy is concerned. At the moment, the "nay" votes are slightly ahead of the "ayes". But we need more votes, so let me repeat the invitation to speak your mind.

# The House Of The Worm

by Merle Prout

A reader refers to the "charnel odor" of horror, in discussing our introduction to the February issue of MOH. He could very well have been describing this present story, which has remained vivid in our memory since we first read it in 1933. It did not "rate" highly with the readers of the magazine in which it first appeared, very possibly because of the competition with such authors as H. P. Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard, Seabury Quinn, and Frank Belknap Long, who were also in the race that month. Without in any way demeaning these masters, or the stories they had at that time, we still feel that Mr. Prout's first effort had no less memorable qualities.

But see, amid the mimic rout  
A crawling shape intrude!  
A blood-red thing that writhes from  
out  
The scenic solitude!  
It writhes!—it writhes!—with mortal  
pangs  
The mimes become its food,  
And the angels sob at vermin fangs  
In human gore imbued.

—Edgar Allan Poe

FOR HOURS I had sat at my study table, trying in vain to feel and transmit to paper the sensations of a criminal in the death-house. You know how one may strive for hours — even days — to attain a desired effect, and then feel a sudden swift rhythm, and know he has found

it? But how often, as though Fate herself intervened, does interruption come and mar, if not cover completely, the road which for a moment gleamed straight and white! So it was with me.

Scarcely had I lifted my hands to the keys when my fellow-roomer, who had long been bent quietly over a magazine, said, quietly enough, "That moon — I wonder if even it really exists!"

I turned sharply. Fred was standing at the window, looking with a singularly rapt attention into the darkness.

Curious, I rose and went to him, and followed his gaze into the night. There was the moon, a little past its full, but still nearly round, standing like a great red shield close above the tree-tops, yet real enough. . . .

Something in the strangeness of my friend's behavior prevented the irritation which his unfortunate interruption would ordinarily have caused.

"Just why did you say that?" I asked, after a moment's hesitation.

Shamefacedly he laughed, half apologetic. "I'm sorry I spoke aloud," he said. "I was only thinking of a bizarre theory I ran across in a story."

"About the moon?"

"No. Just an ordinary ghost story of the type you write. *While Pan Walks* is its name, and there was nothing in it about the moon."

He looked again at the ruddy

globe, now lighting the darkened street below with a pale, tenuous light. Then he spoke: "You know, Art, that idea has taken hold of me; perhaps there is something to it after all. . . ."

Theories of the bizarre have always enthralled, Fred as they always hold a romantic appeal for me. And so, while he revolved his latest fancy in his mind, I waited expectantly.

"Art," he began at last, "do you believe that old story about thoughts becoming realities? I mean, thoughts of men having a physical manifestation?"

I reflected a moment, before giving way to a slight chuckle. "Once," I answered, "a young man said to Carlyle that he had decided to accept the material world as a reality; to which the older man only replied, 'Egad, you'd better!' . . . Yes," I continued, "I've often ran across the theory, but . . ."

"You've missed the point," was the quick rejoinder. "Accept your physical world, and what do you have? — Something that was created by God! And how do we know that all creation has stopped? Perhaps even we. . . ."

He moved to a book-shelf, and in a moment returned, dusting off a thick old leather-bound volume.

"I first encountered the idea here," he said, as he thumbed the yellowed pages, "but it was not until that bit of fiction press-

ed it into my mind that I thought of it seriously. Listen:

"The Bible says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." From what did He create it? Obviously, it was created by thought, imagery, force of will if you please. The Bible further says: "So God created man in His own image." Does this not mean that man has all the attributes of the Almighty, only upon a smaller scale? Surely, then, if the mind of God in its omnipotence could create the entire universe, the mind of man, being made in the image of God, and being his counterpart on earth, could in the same way, if infinitely smaller in degree, create things of its own will.

"For example, the old gods of the dawn-world. Who can say that they did not exist in reality, being created by man? And, once created, how can we tell whether they will not develop into something to harass and destroy, beyond all control of their creators? *If this be true, then the only way to destroy them is to cease to believe.* Thus it is that the old gods died when man's faith turned from them to Christianity."

He was silent a moment, watching me as I stood musing.

"Strange where such thoughts can lead a person," I said. "How are we to know which things are real and which are fancies — racial fantasies, I mean, com-

mon in all of us. I think I see what you mean when you wondered if the moon were real."

"But imagine," said my companion, "a group of people, a cult, all thinking the same thoughts, worshipping the same imaginary figure. What might not happen, if their fanaticism were such that they thought and felt deeply? A physical manifestation, alien to those of us who did not believe. . . ."

And so the discussion continued. And when at last we finally slept, the moon which prompted it all was hovering near the zenith, sending its cold rays upon a world of hard physical reality.

NEXT MORNING we both arose early — Fred to go back to his prosaic work as a bank clerk, I to place myself belatedly before my typewriter. After the diversion of the night before, I found that I was able to work out the bothersome scene with little difficulty, and that evening I mailed the finished and revised manuscript.

When my friend came in he spoke calmly of our conversation the night before, even admitting that he had come to consider the theory a rank bit of metaphysics.

Not quite so calmly did he speak of the hunting-trip which he suggested. Romantic fellow that he was, his job at the bank was sheer drudgery, and any

escape was rare good fortune. I, too, with my work out of the way and my mind clear, was doubly delighted at the prospect.

"I'd like to shoot some squirrels," I agreed. "And I know a good place. Can you leave tomorrow?"

"Yes, tomorrow; my vacation starts then," he replied. "But for a long time I've been wanting to go back to my old stamping-grounds. It's not so very far — only a little over a hundred miles, and" — he looked at me in apology for differing with my plans — "in Sacrament Wood there are more squirrels than you ever saw."

And so it was agreed.

SACRAMENT WOOD is an anomaly. Three or four miles wide and twice as long, it fills the whole of a peculiar valley, a rift, as it were, in the rugged topography of the higher Ozarks. No stream flows through it, there is nothing suggesting a normal valley; it is merely there, by sheer physical presence defying all questions. Grim, tree-flecked mountains hem it in on every side, as though seeking by their own ruggedness to compensate this spot of gentleness and serenity. And here lies the peculiarity: though the mountains around here are all inhabited—sparsely, of course, through necessity — the valley of the

wood, with every indication of a wonderful fertility, has never felt the plow; and the tall, smooth forest of scented oak has never known the ax of the woodman.

I too had known Sacrament Wood; it was generally recognized as a sportsman's paradise, and twice, long before, I had hunted there. But that was so long ago that I had all but forgotten, and now I was truly grateful to have been reminded of it again. For if there is a single place in the world where squirrels grow faster than they can be shot, it is Sacrament Wood.

It was midafternoon when we finally wound up the last mountain trail to stop at last in a small clearing. A tiny shanty with clapboard roof stood as ornament beside the road, and behind it a bent figure in faded overalls was chopping the withered stalks of cotton.

"That would be old Zeke," confided my companion, his eyes shining with even this reminder of childhood. "Hallo!" he shouted, stepping to the ground.

The old mountaineer straightened, and wrinkled his face in recognition. He stood thus a moment, until my companion inquired as to the hunting; then his eyes grew dull again. He shook his head dumbly.

"Ain't no hunting now, boys. Everything is dead. Sacrament Wood is dead."

"Dead!" I cried. "Impossible! Why is it dead?"

I knew in a moment that I had spoken without tact. The mountaineer has no information to give one who expresses a desire for it — much less an outlander who shows incredulity.

The old man turned back to his work. "Ain't no hunting now," he repeated, and furiously attacked a stalk of cotton.

So obviously dismissed, we could not remain longer. "Old Zeke has lived too long alone," confided Art as we moved away. "All mountaineers get that way sooner or later."

We continued. The road stretched ahead for some distance along the level top. And then, as we started the rough descent, Sacrament Wood burst full upon our view, clothed as I had never before seen it. Bright red, yellow, and brown mingled together in splashes of beauty as the massive trees put on their autumnal dress. Almost miniature it appeared to us from our lookout, shimmering like a mountain lake in the dry heat of early fall.

NIGHT COMES early in the deep valley of Sacrament Wood. The sun was just resting on the high peak in the west as we entered the forest and struck camp. But long after comparative darkness had come over us, the mountain down which we had come was illuminated a soft gold.

We sat over our pipes in the gathering dusk. It was deeply peaceful, there in the darkening wood, and yet Fred and I were unnaturally silent, perhaps having the same thoughts. Why were the massive trees so early shorn of leaves? Why had the birds ceased to sing?

A cheery fire soon dispelled our fears. We were again the two hunters, rejoicing in our freedom and our anticipation. At least, I was. Fred, however, somewhat overcame my feeling of security.

"Art, whatever the cause, we must admit that Sacrament Wood is dead. Why, man, those trees are not getting ready for dormance; they are dead. Why haven't we heard birds? Blue-jays used to keep this place in a continual uproad. And where did I get the feeling I had as we entered here? Art, I am sensitive to these things. I can *feel* a graveyard in the darkest night; and that is how I felt as I came here — as if I was entering a graveyard. I know, I tell you!" "I felt it, too," I answered. "But all that is gone now. The fire changes things."

"Yes, the fire changes things. Hear that moaning in the trees? You think that is the wind? Well, you're wrong, I tell you. That is not the wind. Something not human is suffering; maybe the fire hurts it."

I laughed, uncomfortably enough. "Come," I said, "you'll

be giving me the jimmies, too. I felt the same way you did; I even smelt an odor, but the old man just had us upset. That's all. The fire has changed things. It's all right now."

"Yes," he said, "it's all right now."

For all his nervousness, Fred was the first to sleep that night. We heaped the fire high before turning in, and I lay for a long while and watched the leaping flames. And I thought about the fire.

"Fire is clean," I said to myself, as though directed from without. "Fire is clean; fire is life. The very life of our bodies is preserved by oxidation. Yes, without fire there would be no cleanliness in the world."

But I too must have dropped off, for when I was awakened by a low moan the fire was dead. The wood was quiet; not a whisper or rustle of leaves disturbed the heavy stillness of the night. And then I sensed the odor. . . . Once sensed, it grew and grew until the air seemed heavy, even massive with the inertia of it, seemed to press itself into the ground through sheer weight. It eddied and swirled in sickening waves of smell. It was the odor of death, and putridity.

I heard another moan.

"Fred," I called, my voice catching in my throat.

The only answer was a deeper moan.

I grasped his arm, and — my fingers sank in the bloated flesh as into a rotting corpse! The skin burst like an over-ripe berry, and slime flowed over my hand and dripped from my fingers.

OVERCOME WITH horror, I struck a light; and under the tiny flare I saw for a moment — his face! Purple, bloated, the crawling flesh nearly covered his staring eyes; white worms swarmed his puffed body, exuded squirming from his nostrils, and fell upon his livid lips. The foul stench grew stronger; so thick was it that my tortured lungs cried out for relief. Then, with a shriek of terror, I cast the lighted match from me, and threw myself into the bed, and buried my face in the pillow.

How long I lay there, sick, trembling, overcome with nausea, I do not know. But I slowly became aware of a rushing sound in the tree-tops. Great limbs creaked and groaned; the trunks themselves seemed to crack in agony. I looked up, and saw a ruddy light reflected about us. And like a crash of thunder came the thought into my brain:

"Fire is clean; fire is life. Without fire there would be no cleanliness in the world."

And at this command I rose, and grasped everything within reach, and cast it upon the dying flames. Was I mistaken, or was the odor of death really less?

I hauled wood, and heaped the fire high. Fortunate indeed that the match I had thrown had fallen in the already sere leaves!

When next I thought of my companion the roaring blaze was leaping fifteen feet in air. Slowly I turned, expecting to see a corpse weltering in a miasma of filth, and saw — a man calmly sleeping! His face was flushed, his hands still slightly swollen; but he was clean! He breathed. Could I, I asked, have dreamed of death, and the odor of death? Could I have dreamed the *worms*?

I awoke him, and waited.

He half looked at me, and then, gazing at the fire, gave a cry of ecstasy. A light of bliss shone for a moment in his eyes, as in a young child first staring at the mystery of cleansing flame; and then, as realization came, this too faded into a look of terror and loathing.

"The worms!" he cried. "The maggots! The odor came, and with it the worms. And I awoke. Just as the fire died. . . . I couldn't cry out. The worms came — I don't know whence; from nowhere, perhaps. They came, and they crawled, and they ate. And the smell came with them! It just appeared, as did the worms, from out of thin air! It just — became. Then — death! — I died, I tell you — I rotted — I rotted, and the worms — the maggots — they ate. . . . I am *dead*, I say! *Dead!* Or should

bel" He covered his face with his hands.

HOW WE LIVED out the night without going mad, I do not know. All through the long hours we kept the fire burning high; and all through the night the lofty trees moaned back their mortal agony. The rotting death did not return; in some strange way the fire kept us clean of it, and fought it back. But our brains felt, and dimly comprehended, the noisome evil floundering in the darkness, and the pain which our immunity gave this devilish forest.

I could not understand why Fred had so easily fallen a victim to the death, while I remained whole. He tried to explain that his brain was more receptive, more sensitive.

"Sensitive to what?" I asked.

But he did not know.

Dawn came at last, sweeping westward before it the web of darkness. From across the forest, and around us on all sides, the giant trees rustled in pain, suggesting the gnashing of millions of anguished teeth. And over the ridge to eastward came the smiling sun.

Never was a day so long in coming, and never so welcome its arrival. In a half-hour our belongings were gathered, and we quickly drove to the open road.

"Fred, you remember our conversation of a couple of eve-

nings ago?" I asked my companion, after some time of silence. "I'm wondering whether that couldn't apply here."

"Meaning that we were the victims of — hallucination? Then how do you account for this?" He raised his sleeve above his elbow, showing his arm. How well did I remember it! For there, under curling skin and red as a brand, was the print of my hand!

"I sensed, not felt, you grip me last night," said Fred. "There is our evidence."

"Yes," I answered, slowly. "We've got lots to think of, you and I."

And we rode together in silence.

When we reached home, it was not yet noon, but the brightness of the day had already wrought wonders with our perspective. I think that the limitation of the human mind, far from being a curse, is the most merciful thing in the world. We live on a quiet, sheltered island of ignorance, and from the single current flowing by our shores we visualize the vastness of the black seas around us, and see — simplicity and safety. And yet, if only a portion of the cross-currents and whirling vortexes of mystery and chaos could be revealed to our consciousness, we should immediately go insane.

## THE WOUND ON Fred's

arm healed quickly; in a week not even a scar remained. But we were changed. We had seen the cross-current, and — we knew. By daylight a swift recollection often brought nausea; and the nights, even with the lights left burning, were rife with horror. Our very lives seemed bound into the events of one night.

Yet, even so, I was not prepared for the shock I felt when, one night nearly a month later, Fred burst into the room, his face livid.

"Read this," he said in a husky whisper, and extended a crumpled newspaper to my hand. I reached for it, read where he had pointed.

## MOUNTAINEER DIES

Ezekiel Whipple, lone mountaineer, aged 64, was found dead in his cabin yesterday by neighbors.

The post-mortem revealed a terrible state of putrefaction; medical men aver that death could not have occurred less than two weeks ago.

The examination by the coroner revealed no sign of foul play, yet local forces for law and order are working upon what may yet be a valuable clue. Jesse Layton, a near neighbor and close friend of the aged bachelor, states that he visited and held conversation with him the day preceding; and it is upon this statement that anticipation of possible arrest is based.

"God!" I cried. "Does it mean . . ."  
"Yes! It's spreading — whatever it is. It's reaching out,

crawling over the mountains. God knows to where it may finally extend."

"No. It is not a disease. It is alive. It's alive, Art! I tell you, I felt it; I *heard* it. I think it tried to talk to me."

For us there was no sleep that night. Every moment of our half-forgotten experience was relived a thousand times, every horror amplified by the darkness and our fears. We wanted to flee to some far country, to leave far behind us the terror we had felt. We wanted to stay and fight to destroy the destroyer. We wanted to plan; but — hateful thought — how could we plan to fight — nothing? We were as helpless as the old mountaineer.

And so, torn by these conflicting desires, we did what was to be expected — precisely nothing. We might even have slipped back in to the even tenor of our lives had not news dispatches showed still further spread, and more death.

Eventually, of course, we told our story. But lowered glances and obvious embarrassment told us too well how little we were believed. Indeed, who could expect normal people of the year 1933, with normal experiences, to believe the obviously impossible? And so, to save ourselves, we talked no more, but watched in dread from the sidelines the slow, implacable growth.

IT WAS MIDWINTER before the first town fell in the way of the expanding circle. Only a mountain village of half a hundred inhabitants; but the death came upon them one cold winter night — late at night, for there were no escapes — and smothered all in their beds. And when the next day visitors found and reported them, there was described the same terrible advanced state of putrefaction that had been present in all the other cases.

Then the world, apathetic always, began to believe. But, even so, they sought the easiest, the most natural, explanation, and refused to recognize the possibilities we half outlined to them. Some new plague, they said, is threatening us, is ravaging our hill country. We will move away. . . . A few moved. But the optimists, trusting all to the physicians, stayed on. And we, scarce knowing why, stayed on with them.

Yes, the world was waking to the danger. The plague became one of the most popular topics of conversation. Revivalists predicted the end of the world. And the physicians, as usual, set to work. Doctors swarmed the infected district, in fear of personal safety examined the swollen corpses, and found — the bacteria of decay, and — the worms. They warned the natives to leave the surrounding

country; and then, to avoid panic, they added encouragement.

"We have an inkling of the truth," they said, after the best manner of the detective agency. "It is hoped that we may soon isolate the deadly bacterium, and produce an immunizing serum."

And the world believed. . . . I, too, half believed, and even dared to hope.

"It is a plague," I said, "some strange new plague that is killing the country. We were there, first of all."

But, "No," said Fred. "It is not a plague. I was there; I felt it; it talked to me. It is Black Magic, I tell you! What we need is, not medicine, but medicine men."

And I—I half believed him, too!

SPRING CAME, and the encroaching menace had expanded to a circle ten miles in radius, with a point in the wood as a center. Slow enough, to be sure, but seemingly irresistible. . . . The quiet, lethal march of the disease, the *death*, as it was called, still remained a mystery — and a fear. And as week after week fled by with no good tidings from the physicians and men of science there assembled, my doubts grew stronger. Why, I asked, if it were a plague, did it never strike its victims during the day? What disease could strike down all life alike, whether animal or vegetable?

"Fred," I said one day, "they can't stand fire — if you are right. We'll burn the wood. We'll take kerosene. We'll burn the wood, and if you are right, the thing will die."

His face brightened. "Yes," he said, "we'll burn the wood, and — the thing will die. Fire saved me: I know it; you know it. Fire could never cure a disease; it could never make normal trees whisper and groan, and crack in agony. We'll burn the wood, and the thing will die."

So we said, and so we believed. And we set to work.

Four barrels of kerosene we took, and tapers, and torches. And on a clear, cold day in early March we set out in the truck. The wind snapped bitterly out of the north; our hands grew blue with chill in the open cab. But it was a clean cold. Before its pure sharpness, it was almost impossible to believe that we were heading toward filth and a barren country of death. And, still low in the east, the sun sent its bright yellow shafts over the already budding trees.

It was still early in the morning when we arrived at the edge of the slowly enlarging circle of death. Here the last victim, only a day or so earlier, had met his end. Yet, even without this last to tell us of its nearness, we could have judged by the absence of all life. The tiny buds we had noted earlier were ab-

sent; the trees remained dry and cold as in the dead of winter.

Why did not the people of the region heed the warnings and move? True, most of them had done so. But a few old mountaineers remained — and died one by one.

We drove on, up the rocky, precipitous trail, leaving the bustle and safety of the normal world behind us. A faint stench assailed my nostrils—the odor of death. It grew and it grew. Fred was pale; and, for that matter, so was I. Pale — and weak.

"We'll light a torch," I said. "Perhaps this odor will die."

We lit a torch in the brightness of the day, then drove on.

Once we passed a pig-sty: white bones lay under the sun; the flesh was decayed and eaten away entirely.

The sun was still bright, but weak, in some strange way. It shone doubtfully, vacillating, as if there were a partial eclipse.

But the valley was near. We passed the last mountain, passed the falling cabin of the mountaineer who was the first to die. We started the descent.

SACRAMENT WOOD lay below us, not fresh and green as I had seen it first, years before, nor yet flashing with color as on our last trip the autumn before. It was cold, and obscured. A black cloud lay over it, a blanket of darkness, a rolling

mist like that which is said to obscure the River Styx. It covered the region of death like a heavy shroud, and hid it from our probing eyes. Could I have been mistaken, or did I hear a broad whisper rising from the unhallowed wood of the holy name? Or did I feel something I could not hear?

But in one respect I could not be wrong. It was growing dark. The farther we moved down the rocky trail, the deeper we descended into this stronghold of death, the paler became the sun, the more obscured our passage.

"Fred," I said in a low voice, "they are hiding the sun. They are destroying the light. The wood will be dark."

"Yes," he answered. "The light hurts them. I could feel their pain and agony that morning as the sun rose; they can not kill in the day. But now they are stronger, and are hiding the sun itself. The light hurts them, and they are destroying it."

We lit another torch and drove on.

When we reached the wood, the darkness had deepened, the almost palpable murk had thickened until the day had become as a moonlight night. But it was not a silver night. The sun was red; red as blood, shining on the accursed forest. Great red rings surrounded it, like the red rings of sleeplessness surrounding

a diseased eye. No, the sun itself was not clean; it was weak, diseased, powerless as ourselves before the new terror. Its real glow mingled with the crimson of the torches, and lit up the scene around us with the color of blood.

WE DROVE AS far as solid ground would permit our passage — barely to the edge of the forest, where the wiry, scraggly growth of cedar and blackjack gave place to the heavy growth of taller, straighter oak. Then we abandoned our conveyance and stepped upon the rotting earth. And at this, more strongly it seemed than before, the stench of rottenness came over us. We were thankful that all animal matter had decayed entirely away; there only remained the acrid, penetrating odor of decaying plants; disagreeable, and powerfully suggestive to our already sharpened nerves, but endurable. . . . And it was warm, there in the death-ridden floor of the valley. In spite of the season of the year and the absence of the sun's warmth, it was not cold. The heat of decay, of fermentation, overcame the biting winds which occasionally swept down from the surrounding hills.

The trees were dead. Not only dead; they were rotten. Great limbs had crashed to the ground, and littered the soggy floor. All smaller branches were gone,

but the trees themselves remained upright, their naked limbs stretched like supplicating arms to the heavens as these martyrs of the wood stood waiting. Yet in even these massive trunks the worms crawled — and ate. It was a forest of death, a nightmare, fungous forest that cried out to the invaders, that sobbed in agony at the bright torches, and rocked to and fro in all its unholy rottenness.

Protected by our torches, we were immune to the forces of death that were rampant in the dark reaches of the wood, beyond our flaring light. But while they could not prey upon our bodies, they called, they drew upon our minds. Pictures of horror, of putridity and nightmare thronged our brains. I saw again my comrade as he had lain in his bed, over a half-year before; I thought of the mountain village, and of the three-score victims who had died there in one night.

We did not dare, we knew, to dwell on these things; we would go insane. We hastened to collect a pile of dead limbs. We grasped the dank, rotten things — limbs and branches which broke on lifting, or crumbled to dust between our fingers. At last, however, our heap was piled high with the dryest, the firmest of them, and over all we poured a full barrel of kerosene. And as we lit the vast

pile, and watched the flames roar high and higher, a sigh of pain, sorrow and impotent rage swept the field of death.

"The fire hurts them," I said. "While there is fire they can not harm us; the forest will burn, and they will all die."

"But will the forest burn? They have dimmed the sun they have even dimmed our torches. See! They should be brighter! Would the forest burn of itself, even if they let it alone? It is damp and rotten, and will not burn. See, our fire is burning out! We have failed."

Yes, we had failed. We were forced to admit it when, after two more trials, we were at last satisfied beyond any doubt that the forest could not be destroyed by fire. Our hearts had been strong with courage, but now fear haunted us, cold perspiration flooded our sick, trembling bodies as we sent the clattering truck hurtling up the rocky trail to safety. Our torches flared in the wind, and left a black trail of smoke behind us as we fled.

But, we promised ourselves, we would come again. We would bring many men, and dynamite. We would find where this thing had its capital, and would destroy it.

And we tried. But again we failed.

THERE WERE no more

deaths. Even the most obstinate moved from the stricken country when spring came and revealed the actual presence of the deadly circle. No one could doubt the mute testimony of the dead and dying trees that fell in its grip. Fifty, a hundred or two hundred feet in a night the circle spread; trees that one day were fresh and alive, sprouting with shoots of green, were the next day harsh and yellow. The death never retreated. It advanced during the nights; held its ground during the day. And at night again the fearful march continued.

A condition of terror prevailed over the populations in adjoining districts. The newspapers carried in their columns nothing but blasted hopes. They contained long descriptions of each new advance; long, technical theories of the scientists assembled at the front of battle; but no hope.

We pointed this out to the terror-ridden people, told them that in our idea lay the only chance of victory. We outlined to them our plan, pleaded for their assistance. But, "No," they said. "The plague is spreading. It began in the wood, but it is out of the wood now. How would it help to burn the wood now? The world is doomed. Come with us, and live while you can. We must all die."

No, there was no one willing

to listen to our plan. And so we went north, where the death, through its unfamiliarity and remoteness, had not yet disrupted society. Here the people, doubtful, hesitant, yet had faith in their men of science, still preserved order, and continued in industry. But our idea received no welcome. "We trust the doctors," they said.

And none would come.

"FRED," I TOLD him, we have not yet failed. We will equip a large truck. No! We will take a tractor. We will do as we said. Take more kerosene, and dynamite; we will destroy it yet!"

It was our last chance; we knew that. If we failed now, the world was indeed doomed. And we knew that every day the death grew stronger, and we worked fast to meet it.

The materials we needed we hauled overland in the truck; more torches, dynamite, eight barrels of kerosene. We even took two guns. And then we loaded all these in an improvised trailer behind the caterpillar, and started out.

The wood was dark now, although it was not yet midday when we entered. Black as a well at midnight was the forest: our torches sent their flickering red a scant twenty feet through the obstinate murk. And through the shivering darkness

there reached our ears a vast murmur, as of a million hives of bees.

How we chose a path I do not know; I tried to steer toward the loudest part of the roar, hoping that by so doing we would find the source itself of the scourge. And our going was not difficult. The tractor laid down its endless track, crushing to paste beneath it the dank, rotting wood which littered the forest floor. And from behind, over the smooth track crushed through the forest, lumbered the heavy trailer.

The gaunt, scarred trees, shorn of every limb, stood around us like weird sentinels pointing the way. And, if possible, the scene grew more desolate the farther we proceeded; the creaking trunks standing pole-like seemed more and more rotten; the odor of death around us, not the sickening odor of decay, but the less noxious yet more penetrating smell of rottenness complete, grew even more piercing. And It called and drew. From out of the darkness it crept into our brains, moved them, changed them to do its will. We did not know. We only knew that the odor around us no longer nauseated; it became the sweetest of perfumes to our nostrils. We only knew that the fungus-like trees pleased our eyes, seemed to fill and satisfy some long-hidden es-

thetic need. In my mind there grew a picture of a perfect world: damp, decayed vegetation and succulent flesh — rotting flesh — upon which to feed. Over all the earth, it seemed, this picture extended; and I shouted aloud in ecstasy.

At the half-involuntary shout, something flashed upon me, and I knew that these thoughts were not my own, but were foisted upon me from without. With a shriek, I reached to the torch above and bathed my arms in the living flame; I grasped the taper from its setting and brandished it in my comrade's face. The cleansing pain raced through my veins and nerves; the picture faded, the longing passed away; I was myself again.

THEN, SUDDENLY, above the roar from without and the steady beat of our engine, we heard a human chant. I idled the motor, jerked out the gears. Clear on our ears its mote now, a chant in a familiar, yet strangely altered tongue. Life! In this region of death? It was impossible! the chant ceased, and the hum among the poles of trees doubled in intensity. Someone, or something, rose to declaim. I strained my ears to hear, but it was unnecessary; clear and loud through the noisome darkness rose its high semi-chant:

*"Mighty is our lord, the Worm. Mightier than all the*

*kings of heaven and of earth is the Worm. The gods create; man plans and builds; but the Worm effaces their handiwork.*

*"Mighty are the planners and the builders; great their works and their possessions. But at last they must fall heir to a narrow plot of earth; and even that, forsooth, the Worm will take away.*

*"O Master! On bended knee we give thee all these things! We give unto thee the life of the earth to be thy morsel of food! We give unto thee the earth itself to be thy residence!*

*"Mighty, oh mighty above all the kings of heaven and of earth is our lord and master, the Worm, to whom Time is naught!"*

Sick with horror and repulsion, Fred and I exchanged glances. There was life! God knew what sort, but life, and human! Then, there in that forest of hell, with the odor, sight, and sound of death around us, we smiled! I swear we smiled! We were given a chance to fight; to fight something tangible. I raced the motor, snapped the machine into gear and pushed on.

And one hundred feet farther I stopped, for we were upon the worshippers! Half a hundred of them there were, crouching and kneeling, yes, even wallowing in the putrefaction and filth around them. And the sounds, the cries to which they gave vent as our flaming

torches smote full upon their sightless, staring eyes! Only a madman could recall and place upon the printed page the litanies of hate and terror which they flung into our faces. There are vocal qualities peculiar to men, and vocal qualities peculiar to beasts; but nowhere this side of the pit of hell itself can be heard the raucous cries that issued from their straining throats as we grasped our tapers and raced toward them. A few moments only did they stand defiantly in our way; the pain of the unaccustomed light was too much for their sensitive eyes. With shrill shouorts of terror they turned and fled. And we looked about us, upon the weltering filth with which we were surrounded, and — smiled again!

For we saw their idol! Not an idol of wood, or stone, or of any clean, normal thing. It was a heaped-up grave! Massive, twenty feet long and half as high, it was covered with rotting bones and limbs of trees. The earth, piled there in the gruesome mound, shivered and heaved as from some foul life within. Then, half buried in filth, we saw the headstone — itself a rotting board, leaning askew in its shallow setting. And on it was carved only the line: *The House of the Worm.*

The house of the worm! A heaped-up grave! And the cult

of blackness and death had sought to make of the world one foul grave, and to cover even that with a shroud of darkness!

WITH A SHRIEK of rage I stamped my foot upon the earth piled there. The crust was thin, so thin that it broke through, and nearly precipitated me headlong into the pit itself; only a violent wrench backward prevented me from falling into the pitching mass of — worms! White, wriggling, the things squirmed there under our blood-red, flaring light, writhed with agony in the exquisite torture brought to them by the presence of cleansing flame. The house of the worm, indeed.

Sick with loathing, we worked madly. The roar of the alien forest had risen to a howl — an eldritch gibber which sang in our ears and drew at our brains as we toiled. We lit more torches, bathed our hands in the flame, and then, in defiance of the malign will, we demolished the quivering heap of earth which had mocked the form of a grave. We planted dynamite. We carried barrel after barrel of fuel, and poured it upon the squirming things, which were already spreading out, rolling like an ocean of filth at our very feet. And then, forgetting the machine which was to take us to safety, I hurled the box of black powder upon them,

watched it sink through the mass until out of sight, then applied the torch. And fled.

"Art! The tractor — the rest of the oil we need to light our way out . . ."

I laughed insanely, and ran on.

Two hundred yards away, stopped and watched the spectacle. The flames, leaping fifty feet in air, illumined the forest around us, pushed back the thick unnatural gloom into the heavy darkness behind us. Unseen voices that howled madly and mouthed hysterical gibberish tore at our very souls in their wild pleading; so tangible were they that we felt them pull at our bodies, sway them back and forth with the unholy dance of the rocking trees. From the pit of foulness where the flames danced brightest, a dense cloud of yellow smoke arose; a vast frying sound shrilled through the wood, was echoed back upon us by the blackness around. The tractor was enveloped in flames, the last barrel of oil spouting fire. And then . . .

There came a deep, heavy-throated roar; the pulpy ground beneath our feet waved and shook; the roaring flames, impelled by an irresistible force beneath them, rose simultaneously into air, curved out in long sweeping parabolas of lurid flame, and scattered over the moaning forest floor.

The house of the worm was

destroyed; and simultaneously with its destruction the howling voices around us died into a heavy-throated whisper of silence. The black mist of darkness above and about shook for a moment like a sable silk, caught gropingly at us, then rolled back over the ruined trees and revealed — the sun!

The sun, bright in all his noonday glory, burst out full above us, warming our hearts with a golden glow.

"See, Art!" my companion whispered, "the forest is burning! There is nothing now to stop it, and everything will be destroyed."

It was true. From a thousand tiny places flames were rising and spreading, sending queer little creepers of flame to explore for further progress, was taking root.

We turned, we walked swiftly into the breath of the warm south wind which swept down upon us; we left the growing fire at our backs and moved on. A half-hour later, after we had covered some two miles of fallen forest and odorous wasteland, we paused to look back. The fire had spread over the full width of the valley, and was roaring northward. I thought of the fifty refugees who had fled — also to the north.

"Poor devils!" I said. "But no doubt they are already dead;

they could not endure the brightness of the sun for long."

AND SO ENDS our story of what is perhaps the greatest single menace that has ever threatened mankind. Science pondered, but could make nothing of it; in fact, it was long before we could evolve an explanation satisfactory even to ourselves.

We had searched vainly through every reference book on the occult, when an old magazine suddenly gave us the clue: it recalled to our minds a half-forgotten conversation which has been reproduced at the beginning of this narrative.

In some strange way, this Cult of the Worm must have organized for the worship of death, and established their headquarters there in the valley. They built the huge grave as a shrine, and by the over-concentration upon worship of their fanatical minds, caused a physical manifestation to appear within it as the real result of their thought. And what suggestion of death could be more forceful than its eternal accompaniment — the worms of death and the bacteria of decay? Perhaps their task was lessened by the fact that death is always a reality, and does not need so great a concentration of will to produce.

At any rate, from that beginning, that center, they radiated thought-waves strong enough to bring their influence over the region where they were active; and as they grew stronger and stronger, and as their minds grew more and more powerful through the fierce mental concentration, they spread out, and even destroyed light itself. Perhaps they received many recruits, also, to strengthen their ranks, as we ourselves nearly succumbed; perhaps, too, the land once conquered was watched over by spirits invoked to their control, so that no further strength on their part was required to maintain it. That would explain the weird noises heard from all parts of the forest, which persisted even after the worshippers themselves had fled.

\* And as to their final destruction, I quote a line from the old volume where we first read of the theory: "*If this be true, the only way to destroy it is to cease to believe.*" When the mock grave, their great fetish, was destroyed, the central bonds which held their system together were broken. And when the worshippers themselves perished in the flames, all possibility of a recurrence of the terror died with them.

This is our explanation, and our belief.

# The Beautiful Suit

by H. G. Wells

The imaginative tales of H. G. Wells have many facets, and we have offered you four different ones in past issues. *The Inexperienced Ghost* (MOH, August 1963), is a non-traditional approach to haunts; *The Red Room* (MOH, November 1963) is a matter-of-fact terror tale, with suggestions of horror; *A Vision of Judgment* (MOH, February 1964) is religious fantasy, with a touch of satire; and *The Truth About Pyecraft* (MOH, May 1964) is an early example of that hilariously logical approach to magic which John W. Campbell made famous in UNKNOWN magazine during the 40's. Here is another facet of Wells' talent: the strange tale with an atmosphere which can only be described as haunting. It first appeared in the collection entitled *The Time Machine And Other Stories*, and the best date we can give you for it is 1895.

THERE WAS once a little man whose mother made him a beautiful suit of clothes. It was green and gold, and woven so that I cannot describe how delicate and fine it was, and there was a tie of orange fluffiness that tied up under his chin. And the buttons in their newness shone like stars. He was proud and pleased by his suit beyond measure, and stood before the long looking-glass when first he put it on, so astonished and delighted with it that he could hardly turn himself away.

He wanted to wear it everywhere, and show it to all sorts of people. He thought over all the places he had ever visited, and all the scenes he had ever heard described, and tried to imagine what the feel of it would be if he were to go now to those scenes and places wearing his shining suit, and he wanted to go out forthwith into the long grass and the hot sunshine of the meadow wearing it. Just to wear it! But his mother told him "No." She told him he must take great care of

his suit, for never would he have another nearly so fine; he must save it and save it, and only wear it on rare and great occasions. It was his wedding-suit, she said. And she took the buttons and twisted them up with tissue paper for fear their bright newness should be tarnished, and she tacked little guards over the cuffs and elbows, and wherever the suit was most likely to come to harm. He hated and resisted these things, but what could he do? And at last her warnings and persuasions had effect, and he consented to take off his beautiful suit and fold it into its proper creases, and put it away. It was almost as though he gave it up again. But he was always thinking of wearing it, and of the supreme occasions when some day it might be worn without the guards, without the tissue paper on the buttons, utterly and delightfully, never caring, beautiful beyond measure.

ONE NIGHT, when he was dreaming of it after his habit, he dreamt he took the tissue paper from one of the buttons and found its brightness a little faded, and that distressed him mightily in his dream. He polished the poor faded button and polished it, and, if anything, it grew duller. He woke up and lay awake, thinking of the brightness slightly dulled, and

wondering how he would feel if perhaps when the great occasion (whatever it might be) should arrive, one button should chance to be ever so little short of its first glittering freshness, and for days and days that thought remained with him distressingly. And when next his mother let him wear his suit, he was tempted and nearly gave way to the temptation just to fumble off a bit of tissue paper and see if indeed the buttons were keeping as bright as ever.

He went trimly along on his way to church, full of this wild desire. For you must know his mother did, with repeated and careful warnings, let him wear his suit at times, on Sundays, for example, to and fro from church, when there was no threatening of rain, no dust blowing, nor anything to injure it, with its buttons covered and its protections tacked upon it, and a sun-shade in his hand to shadow it if there seemed too strong a sunlight for its colors. And always, after such occasions, he brushed it over and folded it exquisitely as she had taught him, and put it away again.

Now all these restrictions his mother set to the wearing of his suit he obeyed, always he obeyed them, until one strange night he woke up and saw the moonlight shining outside his

window. It seemed to him the moonlight was not common moonlight, nor the night a common night, and for awhile he lay quite drowsily, with this odd persuasion in his mind. Thought joined on to thought like things that whisper warmly in the shadows. Then he sat up in his little bed suddenly very alert, with his heart beating very fast, and a quiver in his body from top to toe. He had made up his mind. He knew that now he was going to wear his suit as it should be worn. He had no doubt in the matter. He was afraid, terribly afraid, but glad, glad.

HE GOT OUT of his bed and stood for a moment by the window looking at the moonshine-flooded garden, and trembling at the thing he meant to do. The air was full of a minute clamor of crickets and murmurings, of the little living things. He went very gently across the creaking boards, for fear that he might wake the sleeping house, to the big dark clothes-press wherein his beautiful suit lay folded, and he took it out garment by garment, and softly and very eagerly tore off its tissue-paper covering and its tacked protections until there it was, perfect and delightful as he had seen it when first his mother had given it to him — a long time it seemed ago. Not a button had

tarnished, not a thread had faded on this dear suit of his; he was glad enough for weeping as in a noiseless hurry he put it on. And then back he went, soft and quick, to the window that looked out upon the garden, and stood there for a minute, shining in the moonlight, with his buttons twinkling like stars, before he got out on the sill, and making as little of a rustling as he could, clambered down to the garden path below. He stood before his mother's house, and it was white and nearly as plain as by day, with every window-blind but his own shut like an eye that sleeps. The trees cast still shadows like intricate black lace upon the wall.

The garden in the moonlight was very different from the garden by day; moonshine was tangled in the hedges and stretched in phantom cobwebs from spray to spray. Every flower was gleaming white or crimson black, and the air was a-quiver with the thridding of small crickets and nightingales singing unseen in the depths of the trees.

There was no darkness in the world, but only warm, mysterious shadows, and all the leaves and spikes were edged and lined with iridescent jewels of dew. The night was warmer than any night had ever been, the heaven by some miracle at once vaster and nearer, and,

in spite of the great ivory-tinted moon that ruled the world, the sky was full of stars.

THE LITTLE MAN did not shout nor sing for all his infinite gladness. He stood for a time like one awe-stricken, and then, with a queer small cry and holding out his arms, he ran out as if he would embrace at once the whole round immensity of the world. He did not follow the neat set paths that cut the garden squarely, but thrust across the beds and through the wet, tall, scented herbs, through the night-stock and the nicotine and the clusters of phantom white mallow flowers and through the thickets of southernwood and lavender, and knee-deep across a wide space of mignonette. He came to the great hedge, and he thrust his way through it; and though the thorns of the brambles scored him deeply and tore threads from his wonderful suit, and though burrs and goose-grass and havers caught and clung to him, he did not care. He did not care, for he knew it was all part of the wearing for which he had longed. "I am glad I put on my suit," he said; "I am glad I wore my suit."

Beyond the hedge he came to the duck-pond, or at least to what was the duck-pond by day. But by night it was a great bowl of silver moonshine all noisy with singing frogs, of wonderful

silver moonshine twisted and clotted with strange patternings, and the little man ran down into its waters between the thin black rushes, knee-deep and waist-deep and to his shoulders smiting the water to black and shining wavelets with either hand, swaying and shivering wavelets, amidst which the stars were netted in the tangled reflections of the brooding trees upon the bank. He waded until he swam, and so he crossed the pond and came out upon the other side, trailing, as it seemed to him, not duckweed, but very silver in long, clinging, dripping masses. And up he went through the transfigured tangles of the farther bank. He came glad and breathless into the highroad. "I am glad," he said, "beyond measure, that I had clothes that fitted this occasion."

The high-road ran straight as an arrow flies, straight into the deep-blue pit of sky beneath the moon, a white and shining road between the singing nightingales, and along it he went, running now and leaping, and now walking and rejoicing, in the clothes his mother had made for him with tireless, loving hands. The road was deep in dust, but that for him was only soft whiteness; and as he went a great dim moth came fluttering round his wet and shimmering and hastening figure. At first he did not heed the moth, and then he

waved his hands at it, and made a sort of dance with it as it circled round his head. "Soft moth!" he cried, "dear moth! And wonderful night, wonderful night of the world! Do you think my clothes are beautiful, dear moth? As beautiful as your scales and all this silver vesture of the earth and sky?"

And the moth circled closer and closer until at last its velvet wings just brushed his lips. . . .

And next morning they found him dead, with his neck broken, in the bottom of the stone pit, with his beautiful clothes a little bloody, and foul and stained with duckweed from the pond. But his face was a face of such happiness that, had you seen it, you would have understood indeed, how that he had died happy, never knowing that cool and streaming silver for the duckweed in the pond.



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# *A Stranger Came To Reap*

*by Stephen Dentinger*

Stephen Dentinger first saw print with an unusual, off-trail detective story in 1955, when we were editing a different chain of magazines. Since our discovery of him, he has gone on to other publications and currently has a series running in THE SAINT MYSTERY MAGAZINE. He also appeared in the August 1961 issue of our sister publication, EXPLORING THE UNKNOWN, with an eerie article on what seem to be authentic instances of spontaneous human combustion. He resides in upstate New York but prefers vagueness about the exact location.

AFTER THE distant cloud of smoke had settled on the horizon and the battle passed on out of sight, old Feopple ceased to watch. He went back to his mid-day toil, for there was much to be done on the farm at harvest time. The war these days came like the harvest, and he was only thankful that the unseen armies had not met here, among his fields of corn and grain. He'd seen a farm once,

after the armies passed, burned and ravaged beyond hope, with the scattered bodies left to rot with the dreams of some poor family. He'd seen it, and remembered.

Now, with the clouds already heavy and the wind blowing a secret warning for the few to heed, he knew he must work swiftly. For winter came like the armies, and was just as ruthless to the unready.

He had toiled alone for all these years, and this year was no different. The youth had scattered from the earth, plucked up by the nudging of fear or the needs of government, and no more could he depend upon the aid of his neighbors. They had long ago ceased to make their way up to the rough dirt road to his farm when harvest time approached. And his wife and daughter could only be depended upon for so much.

But it was a good life, close to the soil, and as long as the fires of the way stayed distant he had no reason to complain. As the thoughts of this autumn day passed through his mind he hurried a bit with the reaping, swinging the great blade of the scythe in ever-widening circles. The look of the sky was not good. So it was in the intent of his purpose that he failed to hear the stranger's approach.

"COULD I HELP you?" the man asked. He spoke old People's language, but with an accent that was unfamiliar. He was a tall, gaunt man, and he stood now in the very edge of the field as if not quite daring to enter without permission. His clothes — what was left of them — were dirty and torn rags, and perhaps as People looked closer he thought he detected some bloodstains too.

"I am nothing. A wanderer only. I need work, shelter."

People knew not what to think. The man — or was he only a youth? — seemed sincere, and might well be a good worker. Still, he knew nothing of this stranger who had come walking across the fields in his tattered clothing.

"All right," he decided suddenly. "Can you handle a scythe?"

The other nodded. "I came from a farm, long ago." He had stepped forward, and now he took the tool from People's unresisting hands. He swung it once and downed a crescent of wheat, more almost than People could cut with two such blows. With his long and bulging arms he seemed made for the field.

"You have an arm on you, boy," People said, having somehow vaguely satisfied himself as to the stranger's youth. "What is your name?"

"Call me Can. I have no other name now."

"Can. Are you from this region?"

Shaking his head he answered, "From far south, where winter hardly comes. Where the spring is early every year."

PEOPLE HEARD a sound from the house and saw that his wife was coming out to meet the stranger. Marie had always liked visitors. One of the barren parts of her recent life had been the absence of friends and neighbors to visit them here on

the hill. "This is my wife, Can," People said, and they exchanged traditional greetings.

"He seems like a good worker," Marie remarked as Can went back to the fields with his newly acquired scythe. "But his clothes! Is he from the war?"

"I do not know, Marie," People answered slowly. "I only know he has a strong back and arms, and that he wants to work."

"I will find him some clothes to wear," she said.

But as they stood by the edge of the field watching the gaunt figure swinging his scythe against the leaden skies, he felt a shiver tremble her arm. "What is it, dear? What troubles you?"

"Like that, he looks so much like Death, does he not? Like the Death in the painting."

People remembered the picture, of the bony horror with his blood-dipped scythe, harvesting a crop of doomed souls. He had never liked the painting, and one night in a fit of depression had hurled it into the fire. The burning of the varnished frame had filled the house with an unpleasant odor for days.

"That's foolishness," he told her now, but these same thoughts had occurred to him. He wished somehow the sun would burst forth from the overcast and brighten the gloom of the scene.

THEIR DAUGHTER, Ruth, was a plain, buxom girl of

twenty-three, who had been away from the farm only twice since leaving school at the age of fifteen. Once she had gone to a dance in the village and come home heartbroken at some teenage cruelty. Another time she had gone with her father to the nearby city, in those days when such travel was still safe. Now, when smoke clouded the horizon almost monthly, such trips were no longer safe for any of them. And on nights when People was depressed enough to privately bemoan his daughter's celibate state in life, he at least could thank the gods that she — and they — were still alive.

Of course there had been occasional stories drifting up from the village, in those days when they still had visitors. Stories of the armies overrunning farmlands, ravishing women, killing men. Perhaps Ruth was not to be cried over. These days, these times, one was thankful to be alive.

But Ruth took to the stranger, Can, from the first. She seemed to patter and sparkle with a new life, and often on those first mornings she would be in her room for some time, combing her long brown hair to a glisten before descending the creaking wood staircase to breakfast. Can ate with them, silently for the most part, with only an overly obvious comment on the weather when it seemed necessary. He seemed happy, yet vaguely un-

easy, as if the memory of war was perhaps still there, just beneath the surface, waiting to reappear in all its horror.

They never asked him what side he had fought under. In a war that destroys the land, both sides are the enemy. The remains of his uniform had been burnt that first afternoon, and no one mentioned it again. No one considered his act of desertion, because it seemed somehow so altogether right and proper to them all.

Each morning after breakfast he would cheerfully accompany Ruth on her barnyard chores, watching in smiling silence while she tended to the chickens and pigs, helping her carry in the carefully cut logs for the fire-place. Then, she in turn would wander out to watch him in the day when he continued with the reaping.

One day, perhaps a week after the coming of Can, old People once again saw the smoke rising from the horizon. But this time it was farther away, and from the southwest. "They are passing on, Can," he said, pausing for a moment with his harvesting chores. "They will not be back this way."

But the young man shook his head. "They always come back." He hefted the great scythe and continued with his reaping. And perhaps his shoulders were not quite as firm as they had been before.

"TELL ME ALL about yourself," Ruth said to him one morning several days later. "Tell me about your life before we knew you."

They were in the barn alone, seeking shelter from a sudden rain that had come upon the hillside with the morning. He sat, like some glorious knight, on the back of a cow, looking happier than she'd ever seen him.

"Why bring up the past, dear girl? I'm happy here to be with you all, happy and very much alive."

"You were a soldier, weren't you? You deserted during the battle." She hadn't meant to make her voice so accusing.

He slid off the cow's back, the smile suddenly gone from his face. "I don't want to talk about it, now or ever!"

He left her standing there, running out into the rain, splashing through shallow puddles already forming in the mud. She watched him run, and a strangled sob escaped from deep inside her. She had wanted so much not to hurt him.

MARIE WAS vaguely troubled. For days the thing had been there, gnawing at her stomach, awakening her in the night. She could remember only that ancient representation of Death with his scythe. Much as she wanted this man who had come

to them to be accepted by her husband and daughter, the fear was there. He had been a warrior, a killer, and worse still had deserted in battle. Had he perhaps brought Death with him across the fields, clinging to his shoulders like the Old Man in the dusky Arabian book she sometimes read?

One night, after Can had been with them two weeks, she spoke to People about her fears. "He and Ruth are together so much of the time. Do you think it is right? What future can there be for them here, in these times?"

"The future there is for any young people," People answered. "I will not interfere!"

"We know nothing about him. Nothing."

"We know that he hates killing and war, that he likes the life of the fields and the pastures. Is that not enough to make a man good in these days?"

"We know also that he ran away from battle. And that he might even have fought on the side of the enemy."

"Woman, woman, what difference does it make if he ran away?"

Marie turned away sadly, back to the fire and the evening's cooking. "It is not good. That is all I know."

TO RUTH HE WAS a figure from a dream world, a tall friendly stranger — always a stranger — who seemed to have

come only for her. And as the days drifted on she found ways alone with him, more minutes and means to spend more time lengthening to half-hours in which to talk to this strange young man.

This day, with an autumn wind beating at the barn door, she watched him sharpening the great scythe blade before another trip to the fields. The reaping was almost done, the harvest completed. Another few hours the fields would be ready for the coming of winter.

"Will you be leaving soon?"

"If the work is finished."

"But where will you spend the winter?"

"In the village, perhaps. I do not know."

She was silent for a time, watching his hand move back and forth over the length of the blade. Then, "I have never been kissed by a boy. Not in all my life." She knew she was sounding like a foolish schoolgirl, but she couldn't suppress the words. They came in a flood now, with the very thought of his leaving.

"What?" He seemed not to have heard.

"Kiss me, Can. Hold me in your arms."

"I . . . I can't."

She went to him, deeply fearful of the twist her words had given to his features. "Why? Why, Can, what is it?"

"I can never love any woman,

or even touch her. Never! I'm dirty, you hear? *Dirty!* You shouldn't even be touching me!"

The violence of his words shocked her. She stumbled backwards against the hay. "I don't care what you've been."

HE TOWERED over her, a pillar of — what? Something utterly beyond her comprehension. "Do you have any idea what it was like? Do you have any idea at all? An army in wartime, crisscrossing the countryside. We were lucky when we found a village to rape. The rest of the time we had only each other — two to a tent."

"What — what are you saying? What are you talking about?" The words meant nothing to her, but the violence of them made her afraid.

"It wasn't the dying that made me run away. That was the least of it! The living was what I couldn't take any longer."

She backed away, suddenly terrified. He was a different man now, he was the soldier of a thousand battles, a hundred wars. He reached for her, violently clutching her dress, ripping it from her shoulder.

"No, no don't!" She tumbled

backwards in the straw, fighting him now, fighting this thing he had become. "Help! Father!"

And old People heard her cry of anguish. He flung open the barn door and saw them like animals, and the rage that boiled within him could not be contained. He reached out his trembling fingers and closed them around the scythe, and brought it down on the despoiler.

LATER, UNDER a sky so bleak and heavy that it reminded People of the day of Can's coming, Marie came out of the house to join him.

"How is the girl?" he asked, as if speaking of a stranger.

"She's resting. I think she will be all right."

"Good."

"What have you done with . . . him? With the body?"

Old People gazed out across the fields for a long time, searching perhaps for another familiar rise of smoke. But today there was nothing. The battle had passed on. Perhaps it would come again, perhaps not.

"I buried him out behind the barn," he answered at last. "After all, he was only a stranger."

# The Morning The Birds Forgot To Sing

by Walt Liebscher

"At a very early age," writes Walt Liebscher, "I used to relate quite provocative tales to the neighbors such as 'I really belong to the iceman', or 'My mother found me floating on a lily pad'." The neighbors were quite enchanted, and one enterprising old maid suggested that Walt's parents purchase a typewriter in order that these literary gems might get down on paper. "At that time," he says, "I didn't know the difference between a typewriter and a washing machine. After years of intensive study I was the only person in the world who could dash out a story on a washing machine." Seriously, he tells us, this will be his fourth professionally published story. The first appeared in a science fiction magazine, the second and third in men's magazines. He's always liked an outre yarn and fondly remembers the days of *WEIRD TALES*, adding, "To be included among the writers in a sorely needed magazine carrying on the tradition of the uncanny and wondrous is a pleasure indeed."

I'LL NEVER FORGET the morning the birds forgot to sing. Not as long as I live. As long as I live! That's a rather peculiar statement for me to make. But I digress. Whenever I die, I think the world should know my story; so, I am writing it down. When it is finished, I will place it with my will. I don't

think he will mind at all. In fact, I rather long to see him, incredible as it may seem.

It had been my habit, at the time, to read until the first rays of the morning sun crossed my windowsill. Then, delightfully tired, I would drift off into a deep slumber. Never, in my whole life, have I enjoyed sleep-

ing so much. My rest was like a gentle death, followed by an awakening almost akin to regeneration. It was a happy time for me.

On that particular morning, I was thoroughly engrossed in re-reading my favorite novel; a strange, enchanting but robust story of Grecian gods, reincarnation, and the glory of ancient Egypt: *After the Afternoon* by Arthur MacArthur. I often wondered how this man with the alliterative name, and his novel with an equally alliterative title, could succeed, year after year, in holding my enrapt attention. But, the novel never failed to enthrall me, and as previously stated, I was held deep in its spell.

I was thoroughly immersed in the rather lurid activities of an Egyptian bawdyhouse when, subconsciously, my attention was pulled away from the novel. Something was wrong! As usual, when distracted from my reading, I unconsciously reached for a cigarette. In doing so, my eyes rested on my bedside clock. Quarter past five! I had no idea it was so late. It was then that the question formed: Where were the birds?

Always, at the first tinge of dawn, the birds welcomed the new day with their threnody of song. My little feathered friends were almost an alarm clock, almost as reliable as the church bell that never failed to join

their delightful chirping at precisely six o'clock. This was my morning symphony, my musical signal to turn out the light and drift into a satisfying slumber. Instead I was profoundly disturbed.

Arising from my bed, I went over to the window, slowly pulled up the shade, and raised the window. The world outside seemed to be enveloped in a thick, palpable fog. Almost at once an unearthly feeling took command of my body. I suddenly realized I was incredibly cold.

In a sort of shivering stupor, I stood spellbound by the window, watching the gray, viscous fog ooze into my room. For what seemed an interminable time, my feet seemed to be glued to the floor. Finally, I had the presence of mind to go to my wardrobe for some clothing. Dazedly, I donned my robe and put on some house slippers.

I was still very cold. The curious, boiling fog, which by now completely filled my bedroom, seemed to send icy fingers to the very narrow of my bones.

Suddenly, I felt inexorably drawn to the outside. With a great deal of misgiving, but with actions certainly not of my own volition, I opened my bedroom door and stepped out into the hall. The fog crawled after me. I went to the front door, opened it, and stepped out on the porch. Far in the distance I heard the

mournful wail of a train whistle. Mentally, I clutched the sound to me, as if it were my last link with reality.

THE FOG WAS everywhere. The whole world seemed to be a fantastic symphony in gray — light gray, dark gray, brackish gray, wet, undulating, piercingly cold gray. I stepped off the porch and started to walk across the dawn, bound for some undetermined destination.

Suddenly, I stopped and reached down towards the dewy gray grass. My fingers tenderly grasped a still warm, feathery handful; I had kicked it with my soft slippers foot. Instinctively I knew it was no longer alive. It was one of my birds, one of my birds that would never sing again. Like a small, blubbering child, I sat down on the cold grass and began to cry softly, pressing the little body to my cheek. It seemed to be the only warm thing left in the world.

Slowly it approached.

"Why do you cry?" asked the sickly gray mass as it hovered over me.

"I cry because I am unhappy and frightened," I said.

"Are you unhappy because I touched the birds?" asked the gray mass as it gradually shaped into the hazy outlines of a man.

"If, in touching them, you caused their death, yes. That is why I am unhappy." Then, in

defiance, I looked straight at his gray, formless face.

"And are you frightened of me?" he asked.

"Not for myself, but for what may happen to others. I have never been afraid of you."

He drew the grayness closer to him and sat down on the grass beside me. "Then you know who I am?"

"Yes, I know." For some strange reason I was no longer cold. Realizing I was still holding the dead bird in my hand, I gently laid it down on the grass. It was then I noticed the grass was no longer gray, but green as it should be. However, the clinging fog still lingered.

"Do you mind if we talk for awhile?" he asked.

"No," I answered, "I don't mind."

For a long while we were silent, and I found myself staring at his face with complete fascination. There was utter desolation in this half-formed countenance, desolation tinged with an incredible loneliness. What should have been eyes were merely two empty holes in the grayness. It was as if you were looking at infinity through the wrong end of a pair of binoculars.

There were no eyelids; there were no other features. You could shape it into a face only by the power of suggestion. When he spoke, the mouth re-

sembled a miniature tornado, laid on end.

"You are rather unique," he said. "There is no fear. You experience only curiosity and fascination. Is there any meaning for you in my face, if that you may call it?"

"There is much meaning," I replied. "There is also an indescribable loneliness. I had no idea you could be lonely."

"It is not loneliness you see, my friend. I can count civilization upon civilization as companions. No! What you see is a longing for the living. The dead are all my comrades. In the end, without exception, they are all glad to see me."

THERE WAS A moment of silence. I said nothing in return.

"I'm sorry," he continued, "sorry about your birds. Sometimes the madness hits me and I try to play at being alive. But, always, the same results. One of these days I'll make it through. If I could spend just one day as a live creature, I would be satisfied throughout eternity. As it is, I can only beg forgiveness."

He paused for a moment, as if lost in deep thought. "If it is any recompense, I can assure you they will be much happier with me. My home is a haven for all once-living things."

I was at once amazed and puzzled. "Were you trying, as you put it, to make it through when you killed my birds?"

"I must admit I was," he answered.

"How strange."

"What do you mean, strange?"

Somewhat I smiled. "I always presumed you had infinite powers."

"Only over the end of life. Not during its fullness."

There was another long silence. Finally, he said, "I have overstayed my time. I must go now."

I started to rise. "I am ready."

He then made an unearthly sound that only faintly resembled laughter. "I'm sorry if I gave you that impression, sir. I did not come for you. Even if it were your time, I would not take you now. I like you. You are not afraid."

Once again I studied his curious countenance. "Can you tell me one thing?" I asked.

"If it is within my power, yes."

I hesitated, trying to find just the right words. "Just how long do I have left?"

"I can not tell you that, my friend. Even if I did, you would not believe me." He rose and slowly drifted towards the alley.

Suddenly he turned and looked at me for the last time. "I can promise you one thing, sir, and that is a long, happy life."

Subconsciously, I raised my arm in a rather antiquated gesture of farewell. "Sir," I said, "I sincerely hope that some day

you — that in some way you make it through."

"If I do, I'll try to let you know." His gray form melted before the sudden onslaught of the morning sun. As the turgid fog dispersed I seemed to hear his voice from a far, far distance. He was humming something very odd, but singularly appropriate. I clearly recognized the strains of "Til We Meet Again."

WHEN I WROTE the above, many years ago, I presumed I was nearing the end of my journey through time. But, obviously, I am still here. I must add a few remarks.

At dawn, yesterday, a little bird hopped upon my windowsill. It immediately began to sing. Never, in my long life, have I heard such exultation. It was as if the heavens had opened up and showered this little bird with an accumulation of all the joyous sounds of the universe. Here was sunshine, lightness, love, freedom, mystery. And the song went on as I lay spell-bound on my bed, not moving a muscle in fear it might end.

I have no idea how long I was held in the spell of the magical melodies, for I was sud-

denly startled to hear the unmistakable strains of "Till We Meet Again". Shortly, after, the song reached such a pitch of ecstasy I thought I would surely die of overjoy. The very essence of life seemed to be surging through every atom of my body.

Abruptly the song ended. I looked up just in time to see the little bird toppled over. When I picked it up it was quite dead. Then, looking into its eyes, I noticed an indefinable, shimmery grayness. Even in death these remarkable eyes seemed to cry out with the flame of life.

As if in answer to a tender supplication, I found myself speaking softly. "No, my friend, I am not angry. I can not deny you the life of one little bird in exchange for so much joy. The bird will be content with you. How can I feel anger when I'm so happy — so very happy to know you finally made it through?"

Then, I went over to the window and looked out at the warm, cheery rays of the morning sun. "And please, my friend," I asked, tenderly, "please come for me soon. One hundred and twenty years are far, far too many."



# Bones

*by Donald A. Wollheim*

As in science fiction, the secondary implications of an initial fantastic assumption in a horror tale are important. A story can be a total failure if important considerations of this nature are overlooked. However, there are some such implications that hardly anyone thinks of, and fresh stories on very old themes can be written when an author hits upon a secondary implication that just hasn't occurred to anyone before — as in this present story. Our thanks to Steve King for reminding us of it.

THE MUSEUM of Natural Sciences was not very far from the place where he was staying, so Severus found himself striding briskly through the dim, winding streets that night. He had come to Boston on a visit, renewed acquaintances with learned men with whom he had exchanged knowledge in years past; thus the letter he had received in this morning's mail inviting him to a private demonstration this night.

It was not a pleasant walk; already he was beginning to regret not having taken some other means of transportation. The buildings were old and loomed darkly over the narrow streets. Lights were few; for the most part, they came from flickering, dust encrusted lamp posts of last century's design. Large moths and other nocturnal insects fluttered over their surfaces, added their moving shadows to the air of desolation

which hung about these ways.

The moon was behind clouds that had streaked across the autumn skies all day and now blocked out the stars. The night about him was warm with that touch of unexpected chill which comes in autumn. Severus shuddered more than once as a wandering breeze slithered across his face unexpectedly around some dreary corner. He increased his pace, looked more suspiciously about him.

Boston, the oldest section of the city. Antique brick buildings dating back to the revolution, some much farther. Dwelling places of the best families of two centuries ago. Now steadily advancing progress and life had left them derelict as upon deserted shores. Old, three or four story structures, narrow tottering dirty red bricked houses with yawning black windows that now looked out through filth-encrusted panes upon streets and by-ways that served to shelter only the poorest and most alien section of the city's people. Forgotten, the district imparted its despair and overhanging doom to the man who walked its ways that night.

Half conquered by the smell of the antique houses, the subtle vibrations of past generations still pervading his spirit, Severus came at last out of the narrow streets into the open square where stood the museum.

The change surprised him.

Here all was open. The dark, cloud streaked sky loomed down overhead with a closeness that appalled him for a moment. The white marble facade of the structure glistened oddly in his view. It stood out, the cleanliness of it, as something exceedingly out of place, as something too new, too recent to have any right here. Its Neo-Grecian designs were horribly modern and crude for the eighteenth century blocks that surrounded it.

He walked swiftly across the open square, up the wide stone steps to the entrance of the building. Quickly he thrust open the small side door, hurried through as if to escape the thoughts of forgotten streets outside.

HOW FUTILE such hopes in a museum! He realized that, the instant the door was closed. He stood in a dark hall, lit dimly by one bulb above the entrance, another one at the opposite end of the main passage. And at once his nostrils were assailed by the inescapable odor of all such institutions — age!

The musty air rushed over his body, took him into its folds. The silence assailed his ears with a suddenness that all but took his breath away. He looked about, trying to catch his bearings. Then he ventured a step, walked rapidly across the large chamber, down a wide corridor opening off it. Not a glance did

he cast from side to side. The looming shadows of indescribable things were enough for him. His imagination supplied the rest. Unavoidable glimpses of shadowy sarcophagi and grotesquely carven idols sent great cold chills thrilling down his spine.

Up a narrow staircase, a turn to the right. At last he was at the room set aside for the night's demonstration. He stood a moment trying to catch his breath and regain composure. Then he pushed the door open, stepped inside.

A BARE ROOM with scarcely any furnishings. About seven or eight other men were there. In low tones they greeted him, drew him over to their circle. All were standing; there were no chairs in the room. A couple of small instrument racks and the main object was all.

The room was dominated by a long, low table upon which rested a six-foot bundle of dull gray cloth like a giant cocoon. Severus stared at it a moment, then recognized it as an Egyptian mummy removed from its coffin case. It obviously awaited unwinding.

So this was what he'd been invited to, he thought, wishing he hadn't been so friendly to the Egyptologists attached to this particular museum.

Glancing around, Severus took note of the others present. He

was surprised to recognize one as a Medical Doctor highly esteemed at a city hospital. The doctor indeed seemed to be one of the active participants in what was about to take place, for he wore a white smock that indicated action.

Bantling, the Egyptologist, held up a hand for silence.

"Most of you know what is about to take place tonight, therefore I will merely outline it for your convenience and for the one or two who know nothing about it." He nodded to Severus and smiled.

"This object, as you have all surmised, is an Egyptian mummy. But it is, we hope, different from all other such mummies previously examined.

"According to our painstaking translation of the hieroglyphics of the sarcophagus whence this body came, this marks an attempt of the priesthood of the IVth Dynasty to send one of their number alive into the lands to come. The unique part of it, and that which occupies us tonight, is that this priest did not die, nor was his body in any way mutilated. Instead, according to the inscriptions, he was fed and bathed in certain compounds that would suspend, indefinitely, the actions of his body cells. He was then put to sleep and prepared for a slumber very like death, yet not true death. In this state he could

remain for years, yet still be reawakened to walk again, a living man.

"In brief, and using modern terminology, these people of what we call ancient times, claim to have solved the secret of suspended animation. Whether or not they did is for us now to determine."

SEVERUS FELT himself grow cold as this knowledge penetrated his being. The past had indeed reached out to the present. He would witness this night the end of an experiment started thousands of years before. Perhaps he himself would yet speak to and hear speak an inhabitant of this lost age. Egypt, buried these hundreds of centuries, Egypt aged beyond belief — yet, a man of that time-lost empire lay here in this very room, in the North American city of Boston.

"3700 B. C." he heard someone remark in answer to an unheard question.

Severus raised his eyes from the object on the table, let his gaze fall upon the window and what was revealed through it. Some of the clouds had cleared away and the cold, bright stars shone through. Far-off flickering spots of light that must surely have shown upon Ancient Egypt as coldly. The very light just passing through his cornea may have originated in the time when this thing upon the table

was about to be plunged into Life-in-Death.

Far off, the dull clanging of a church bell drifted into the room.

"Buck up, old man." A hand patted Severus' shoulder as an acquaintance came over to him. "It isn't as bad as it looks. Why that fellow will be as hale as any of us before the night is out. You'll think he's just a new immigrant."

Bantling and an assistant were even now engaged in unwrapping the mummy. Rolls and rolls of old, crumbling cloth were carefully being unwound from the figure on the table. Dust of death and ages now filled the air. Several coughs were heard; the door was opened on the dark passage outside to let the air change.

A gasp as at last the windings fell away. The body now lay entirely uncovered. Quickly, quietly, the wrappings were gathered together and piled in a receptacle while all crowded about to observe the Egyptian.

All in all, it was in a fine state of preservation. The skin was not brownish; it had not hardened. The arms and legs were still movable, had never stiffened in rigor mortis. Bantling seemed much pleased.

With horror Severus noted the several grayish-blue patches on parts of the face and body which he recognized without asking as a kind of mold.

Dr. Zweig, the physician, bent over and carefully scraped off the fungoid growths. They left nasty reddish pitted scars in the body that made Severus feel sick. He wanted to rush out of the room, out of the building into the clean night air. But the fascination of the horrible kept his glance fixed in hypnosis on the gruesome object before him.

"We are ready." Dr. Zweig said in a low voice.

THEY BEGAN to bathe the body with a sharp-smelling antiseptic, taking off all remaining traces of the preservatives used.

"Remarkable how perfect this thing is," breathed the physician. "Remarkable!"

Now at last the way was open for the work of revival. Large electric pads were brought out, laid all over the body, face and legs. Current was switched into them; the body surface was slowly brought up to normal warmth.

Then arteries and veins were opened, tubes clamped to them running from apparatus under the table. Severus understood that warm artificial blood was being pumped into the body to warm up the internal organs and open up the flow of blood again.

Shortly Dr. Zweig announced himself ready to attempt the final work toward actually bringing the now pliant and vibrant corpse to life. Already the body seemed like that of a liv-

ing man, the flush of red tingling its skin and cheeks. Severus was in a cold sweat.

"Blood flows again through his veins and arteries," whispered the Egyptologist. "It is time to turn off the mechanical heart and attempt to revive his own."

A needle was plunged into the chest, a substance injected into the dormant, thousands-year old cardiac apparatus of the body. Adrenalin, Severus assumed.

Over the mouth and nostrils of the former mummy a bellows was placed, air forced into the lungs at regular periods. For a while there was no result. Severus began fervently to hope that there would be no result. The air was supercharged with tension, horror mixed with scientific zeal. Through the chamber, the wheeze of the bellows was the only sound.

"Look!"

Someone cried out the word, electrifying all in the room of resurrection. A hand pointed shakily at the chest of the thing on the table. There was more action now; the chest rose and fell more vigorously. Quietly the doctor reached over and pulled away the face mask and stopped the pumps.

And the chest of the Egyptian still moved, up and down in a ghastly rhythm of its own. Now to their ears became noticeable an odd sound, a rattling soft wheezing sound as of air being

sucked in and out of a sleeping man.

"He breathes." The doctor reached out and laid a finger on the body's wrists. "The heart beats."

"He lives again!"

Their eyes stared at what had been done. There, on the table, lay a man, a light brown-skinned, sharp Semitic-featured man, appearing to be in early middle age. He lay there as one quietly asleep.

"Who will waken him?" whispered Severus above the pounding of his heart.

"He will awaken soon," was the answer. "He will rise and walk as if nothing had happened."

Severus shook his head, disbelievingly. Then . . .

The Egyptian moved. His hand shook slightly; the eyes opened with a jerk.

Spellbound they stood, the eyes of the Americans fixed upon the eyes of the Ancient. In shocked silence they watched one another.

The Egyptian sat up slowly, as if painfully. His features moved not a bit; his body moved slowly and jerkily.

The Ancient's eyes roved over the assembly. They caught Severus full in the face. For an instant they gazed at one another, the Vermont man looking into

pain-swept ages, into grim depths of agony and sorrow, into the aeons of Past Time itself.

The Egyptian suddenly wrinkled up his features, swept up an arm and opened his mouth to speak.

AND SEVERUS fled from the room in frightful terror, the others closely following. Behind them rang out a terrible, hoarse bellow, cut off by a gurgling which they barely heard. The entire company, to a man, fought each other like terrified animals, each struggling to be the first out of that Museum, out the doors into the black streets and away.

For there are parts of the human body which, never having been alive, cannot be preserved in suspended life. They are the bones, the teeth — strong in death, but unable to defy the crushing millenia.

And when the Egyptian had moved his body and opened his mouth to speak, his face had fallen in like termite - infested wood, the splinters of fragile, age-crumbled bones tearing through the flesh. His whole body had shaken, and, with the swing of the arm, smashed itself into a shapeless mass of heaving flesh and blood through which projected innumerable jagged fragments of dark gray, pitted bones.

# The Ghostly Rental

## by Henry James

While many of Henry James' tales were rewritten after their first publication, he did not, apparently, rework this present story, which first appeared in SCRIBNER'S MONTHLY for their issue of September, 1876. The author attended Harvard Law School in 1862-63, and there is a certain amount of biographical material worked into the tale. Despite its length, so firmly does James fix the reader into this story that neither the wealth of detail nor the slow pace give an impression that cutting would improve it. It seems just the right length as it is, and we have read many shorter stories which seemed longer.

I WAS IN my twenty-second year, and I had just left college. I was at liberty to choose my career, and I chose it with much promptness. I afterward renounced it, in truth, with equal ardor, but I have never regretted those two youthful years of perplexed and excited, but also of agreeable and fruitful experiment. I had a taste for theology, and during my college term I had been an admiring reader of Dr. Channing. This was theology of a greatful and succulent savor;

it seemed to offer one the rose of faith delightfully stripped of its thorns. And then (for I rather think this had something to do with it), I had taken a fancy to the old Divinity School. I have always had an eye to the back scene in the human drama, and it seemed to me that I might play my part with a fair chance of applause (from myself at least), in that detached and tranquil home of mild casuistry, with its respectable avenue on one side, and its prospect of green

fields and contact with acres of woodland on the other. Cambridge, for the lovers of woods and fields, has changed for the worse since those days, and the precinct in question has forfeited much of its mingled pastoral and scholastic quietude. It was then a College-hall in the woods — a charming mixture. What it is now has nothing to do with my story; and I have no doubt that there are still doctrine-haunted young seniors who, as they stroll near it in the summer dusk, promise themselves, later, to taste of its fine leisurely quality. For myself, I was not disappointed. I established myself in a great square, low-browed room, with deep window-benches; I hung prints from Overbeck and Ary Scheffer on the walls; I arranged my books, with great refinement of classification, in the alcoves beside the high chimney-shelf, and I began to read Plotinus and St. Augustine. Among my companions were two or three men of ability and of good fellowship, with whom I occasionally brewed a fireside bowl; and with adventurous reading, deep discourse, potations conscientiously shallow, and long country walks, my initiation into the clerical mystery progressed agreeably enough.

WITH ONE OF my comrades I formed an especial friendship, and we passed a great deal of

time together. Unfortunately he had a chronic weakness of one of his knees, which compelled him to lead a very sedentary life, and as I was a methodical pedestrian, this made some difference in our habits. I used often to stretch away for my daily ramble, with no companion but the stick in my hand or the book in my pocket. But in the use of my legs and the sense of unstinted open air, I have always found company enough. I should, perhaps add that in the enjoyment of a very sharp pair of eyes, I found something of a social pleasure. My eyes and I were on excellent terms; they were indefatigable observers of all way-side incidents, and so long as they were amused I was contented. It is, indeed, owing to their inquisitive habits that I came into possession of this remarkable story.

Much of the country about the old college town is pretty now, but it was prettier thirty years ago. That multitudinous eruption of domiciliary pasteboard which now graces the landscape, in the direction of the low, blue Waltham Hills, had not yet taken place; there were no genteel cottages to put the shabby meadows and scrubby orchards to shame — a juxtaposition by which, in later years, neither element of the contrast has gained. Certain crooked crossroads, then, as I remember

them, were more deeply and naturally rural, and the solitary dwellings on the long grassy slopes beside them, under the tall customary elm that curved its foliage in mid-air like the outward dropping ears of a girdled wheat-sheaf, sat with their shingled hoods well pulled down on their ears, and no prescience whatever of the fashion of French roofs — weather-wrinkled old peasant women, as you might call them, quietly wearing the native coif, and never dreaming of mounting bonnets, and indecently exposing their venerable brows. That winter was what is called an "open" one; there was much cold, but little snow; the roads were firm and free, and I was rarely compelled by the weather to forego my exercise.

ONE GRAY December afternoon I had sought it in the direction of the adjacent town of Medford, and I was retracing my steps at an even pace, and watching the pale, cold tints — the transparent amber and faded rose-color — which curtained, in wintry fashion, the western sky, and reminded me of a sceptical smile on the lips of a beautiful woman. I came, as dusk was falling, to a narrow road which I had never traversed and which I imagined offered me a short cut homeward. I was about three miles away; I was late and

would have been thankful to make them two.

I diverged, walked some ten minutes, and then perceived that the road had a very unfrequent air. The wheel-ruts looked old; the stillness seemed peculiarly sensible. And yet down the road stood a house, so it must in some degree have been a thoroughfare. On one side was a high, natural embankment, on the top of which was perched an apple-orchard, whose tangled boughs made a stretch of coarse black lace-work, hung across the coldly rosy west. In a short time I came to the house, and I immediately found myself interested in it. I stopped in front of it gazing hard, I hardly knew why, but with a vague mixture of curiosity and timidity. It was a house like more of the houses thereabouts, except that it was decidedly a handsome specimen of its class. It stood on a grassy slope, it had its tall, impartially drooping elm beside it, and its old black-cover at its shoulder. But it was of very large proportions, and it had a striking look of solidity and stoutness of timber. It had lived to a good old age, too, for the woodwork on its doorway and under its eaves, carefully and abundantly carved, referred it to the middle, at the latest, of the last century.

All this had once been painted white, but the broad back of

time, leaning against the door-posts for a hundred years, had laid bare the grain of the wood. Behind the house stretched an orchard of apple-trees, more gnarled and fantastic than usual, and wearing, in the deepening dusk, a blighted and exhausted aspect. All the windows of the house had rusty shutters, without slats, and these were closely drawn. There was no sign of life about it; it looked blank, bare and vacant, and yet, as I lingered near it, it seemed to have a familiar meaning — an audible eloquence. I have always thought of the impression made upon me at first sight, by that gray colonial dwelling, as a proof that induction may sometimes be near akin to divination; for after all, there was nothing on the face of the matter to warrant the very serious induction that I made.

I fell back and crossed the road. The last red light of the sunset disengaged itself, as it was about to vanish, and rested faintly for a moment on the time-silvered front of the old house. It touched, with perfect regularity, the series of small panes in the fan-shaped window above the door, and twinkled there fantastically. Then it died away, and left the place more intensely somber. At this moment, I said to myself with the accent of profound conviction — "The house is simply haunted!"

SOMEHOW, immediately, I believed it, and so long as I was not shut up inside, the idea gave me pleasure. It was implied in the aspect of the house, and it explained it. Half an hour before, if I had been asked, I would have said, as beffited a young man who was explicitly cultivating cheerful views of the supernatural, that there were no such things as haunted houses. But the dwelling before me gave a vivid meaning to the empty words; it had been spiritually blighted.

The longer I looked at it, the intenser seemed the secret that it held. I walked all round it, I tried to peep here and there, through a crevice in the shutters, and I took a puerile satisfaction in laying my hand on the door-knob and gently turning it. If the door, had yielded, would I have gone in? — would I have penetrated the dusky stillness? My audacity, fortunately, was not put to the test. The portal was admirably solid, and I was unable even to shake it.

AT LAST I turned away, casting many looks behind me. I pursued my way, and, after a longer walk than I had bargained for, reached the high-road. At a certain distance below the point at which the long lane I have mentioned entered it, stood a comfortable, tidy dwelling, which might have offered itself

as the model of the house which is in no sense haunted — which has no sinister secrets, and knows nothing but blooming prosperity. Its clean white paint stared placidly through the dusk, and its vine-covered porch had been dressed in straw for the winter. An old, one-horse chaise, freighted with two departing visitors, was leaving the door, and through the undraped windows, I saw the lamplit sitting-room, and the table spread with the early "tea," which had been improvised for the comfort of the guests. The mistress of the house had come to the gate with her friends; she lingered there after the chaise had wheeled creakingly away, half to watch them down the road, and half to give me, as I passed in the twilight, a questioning look. She was a comely, quick young woman, with a sharp, dark eye, and I ventured to stop and speak to her.

"That house down that side-road," I said, "about a mile from here — the only one — can you tell me whom it belongs to?"

She stared at me a moment, and, I thought, colored a little. "Our folks never go down that road," she said, briefly.

"But it's a short way to Medford," I answered.

She gave a little toss of her head. "Perhaps it would turn out a long way. At any rate, we don't use it."

This was interesting. A thrifty

Yankee household must have good reasons for this scorn of time-saving processes. "But you know the house, at least?" I said.

"Well, I have seen it."

"And to whom does it belong?"

She gave a little laugh and looked away, as if she were aware that, to a stranger, her words might seem to savor of agricultural superstition. "I guess it belongs to them that are in it."

"But is there any one in it? It is completely closed."

"That makes no difference. They never come out, and no one ever goes in." And she turned away.

But I laid my hand on her arm, respectfully. "You mean," I said, "that the house is haunted?"

She drew herself away, colored, raised her fingers to her lips, and hurried into the house, where, in a moment, the curtains were dropped over the windows.

FOR SEVERAL days, I thought repeatedly of this little adventure, but I took some satisfaction in keeping it to myself. If the house was not haunted, it was useless to expose my imaginative whims, and if it was, it was agreeable to drain the cup of horror without assistance. I determined, of course, to pass that way again; and a week later — it was the last day of the year

— I retraced my steps. I approached the house from the opposite direction, and found myself before it at about the same hour as before. The light was failing, the sky low and gray; the wind wailed along the hard, bare ground, and made slow eddies of the frost-blackened leaves. The melancholy mansion stood there, seeming to gather the winter twilight around it, and mask itself in it, inscrutably. I hardly knew on what errand I had come, but I had a vague feeling that if this time the door-knob were to turn and the door to open, I should take my heart in my hands, and let them close behind me. Who were the mysterious tenants to whom the good woman at the corner had alluded? What had been seen or heard — what was related? The door was as stubborn as before, and my impertinent fumblings with the latch caused no upper window to be thrown open, nor any strange, pale face to be thrust out. I ventured even to raise the rusty knocker and give it half-a-dozen raps, but they made a flat, dead sound, and aroused no echo.

Familiarity breeds contempt; I don't know what I should have done next, if, in the distance, up the road (the same one I had followed), I had not seen a solitary figure advancing. It was unwilling to be observed hanging about this ill-famed dwelling, and I sought refuge among

the dense shadows of a grove of pines near by, where I might peep forth, and yet remain invisible. Presently, the newcomer drew near, and I perceived that he was making straight for the house. He was a little, old man, the most striking feature of whose appearance was a voluminous cloak, of a sort of military cut. He carried a walking-stick, and advanced in a slow, painful, somewhat hobbling fashion, but with an air of extreme resolution. He turned off from the road, and followed the vague wheel-track, and within a few yards of the house he paused. He looked up at it, fixedly and searchingly, as if he were counting the windows, or noting certain familiar marks. Then he took off his hat, and bent over slowly and solemnly, as if he were performing an obeisance.

As he stood uncovered, I had a good look at him. He was, as I have said, a diminutive old man, but it would have been hard to decide whether he belonged to this world or to the other. His head reminded me, vaguely, of the portraits of Andrew Jackson. He had a crop of grizzled hair, as stiff as a brush, a lean, pale, smooth-shaven face, and an eye of intense brilliancy, surmounted with thick brows, which had remained perfectly black. His face, as well as his cloak, seemed to belong to an old soldier; he looked like a retired military man of a modest

rank; but he struck me as exceeding the classic privilege of even such a personage to be eccentric and grotesque. When he had finished his salute, he advanced to the door, fumbled in the folds of his cloak, which hung down much further in front than behind, and produced a key. This he slowly and carefully inserted into the lock, and then, apparently, he turned it. But the door did not immediately open; first he bent his head, turned his ear, and stood listening, and then he looked up and down the road. Satisfied or reassured, he applied his aged shoulder to one on the deep-set panels, and pressed a moment. The door yielded — opening into perfect darkness. He stopped again on the threshold, and again removed his hat and made his bow. Then he went in, and carefully closed the door behind him.

WHO IN THE world was he, and what was his errand? He might have been a figure out of one of Hoffmann's tales. Was he vision or a reality — an inmate of the house, or a familiar, friendly visitor? What had been the meaning, in either case, of his mystic genuflexions, and how did he propose to proceed, in that inner darkness? I emerged from my retirement, and observed narrowly, several of the windows. In each of them, at an interval, a ray of light became visible in the chink between the

two leaves of the shutters. Evidently, he was lighting up; was he going to give a party — a ghostly revel? My curiosity grew intense, but I was quite at a loss how to satisfy it. For a moment I thought of rapping peremptorily at the door; but I dismissed this idea as unmannerly, and calculated to break the spell, if spell there was. I walked round the house and tried, without violence, to open one of the lower windows. It resisted, but I had better fortune, in a moment, with another. There was a risk, certainly, in the trick I was playing — a risk of being seen from within, or (worse) seeing, myself, something that I should repent of seeing. But curiosity, as I say, had become an inspiration, and the risk was highly agreeable.

THROUGH THE parting of the shutters I looked into a lighted room — a room lighted by two candles in old brass flambeaux, placed upon the mantelshelf. It was apparently a sort of back parlor, and it had retained all its furniture. This was of a homely, old-fashioned pattern, and consisted of hair-cloth chairs and sofas, s p a r e mahogany tables, and framed samplers hung upon the walls. But although the room was furnished, it had a strangely uninhabited look; the tables and chairs were in rigid positions, and no small familiar objects were visible. I

could not see everything, and I could only guess at the existence, on my right, of a large folding-door. It was apparently open, and the light of the neighboring room passed through it. I waited for some time, but the room remained empty. At last I became conscious that a large shadow was projected upon the wall opposite the folding-door — the shadow, evidently, of a figure in the adjoining room. It was tall and grotesque, and seemed to represent a person sitting perfectly motionless, in profile. I thought I recognized the perpendicular bristles and far-arching nose of my little old man. There was a strange fixedness in his posture; he appeared to be seated, and looking intently at something. I watched the shadow a long time, but it never stirred.

At last, however, just as my patience began to ebb, it moved slowly, rose to the ceiling, and became indistinct. I don't know what I should have seen next, but by an irresistible impulse, I closed the shutter. Was it delicacy? — was it pusillanimity? I can hardly say. I lingered, nevertheless, near the house, hoping that my friend would reappear. I was not disappointed; for he at last emerged, looking just as when he had gone in, and taking his leave in the same ceremonious fashion. (The lights, I had already observed, had disappeared from the crevices of

each of the windows.) He faced about before the door, took off his hat, and made an obsequious bow. As he turned away I had a hundred minds to speak to him, but I let him depart in peace. This, I may say, was pure delicacy — you will answer, perhaps that it came too late. It seemed to me that he had a right to resent my observation; though my own right to exercise it (if ghosts were in the question) struck me as equally positive. I continued to watch him as he hobbled softly down the bank, and along the lonely road. Then I musingly retreated in the opposite direction. I was tempted to follow him, at a distance, to see what became of him; but this, too, seemed indelicate; and I confess, moreover, that I felt the inclination to coquet a little, as it were, with my discovery — to pull apart the petals of the flower one by one.

I CONTINUED to smell the flower from time to time, for its oddity of perfume had fascinated me. I passed by the house on the cross-road again, but never encountered the old man in the cloak, or any other wayfarer. It seemed to keep observers at a distance, and I was careful not to gossip about it: one inquirer, I said to myself, may edge his way into the secret, but there is no room for two. At the same time, of course, I would have been thankful for

any chance sidelight that might fall across the matter — though I could not well see whence it was to come. I hoped to meet the old man in the cloak elsewhere, but as the days passed by without his reappearing, I ceased to expect it. And yet I reflected that he probably lived in that neighborhood, inasmuch as he had made his pilgrimage to the vacant house on foot. If he had come from a distance, he would have been sure to arrive in some old deep-hooded gig with yellow wheels — a vehicle as venerably grotesque as himself.

One day I took a stroll in Mount Auburn cemetery — an institution at that period in its infancy, and full of a sylvan charm which it has now completely forfeited. It contained more maple and birch than willow and cypress, and the sleepers had ample elbow room. It was not a city of the dead, but at the most a village, and a meditative pedestrian might stroll there without too importunate reminder of the grotesque side of our claims to posthumous consideration. I had come out to enjoy the first foretaste of Spring — one of those mild days of late winter, when the torpid earth seems to draw the first long breath that marks the rupture of the spell of sleep. The sun was veiled in haze, and yet warm, and the frost was oozing from its deepest lurking-places. I had

been treading for half an hour the winding ways of the cemetery, when suddenly I perceived a familiar figure seated on a bench against a southward-facing evergreen hedge.

I CALL THE figure familiar, because I had seen it often in memory and in fancy; in fact, I had beheld it but once. Its back was turned to me, but it wore a voluminous cloak, which there was no mistaking. Here, at last, was my fellow-visitor at the haunted house, and here was my chance, if I wished to approach him! I made a circuit, and came toward him from in front. He saw me, at the end of the alley, and sat motionless, with his hands on the head of his stick, watching me from under his black eyebrows as I drew near. At a distance these black eyebrows looked formidable; they were the only thing I saw in his face. But on a closer view I was reassured, simply because I immediately felt that no man could really be as fantastically fierce as this poor old gentleman looked. His face was a kind of caricature of martial truculence. I stopped in front of him, and respectfully asked leave to sit and rest upon his bench. He granted it with a silent gesture, of much dignity, and I placed myself beside him. In this position I was able, covertly, to observe him. He was quite as much an oddity in the morning sunshine, as he

had been in the dubious twilight. The lines in his face were as rigid as if they had been hacked out of a block by a clumsy woodcarver. His eyes were flamboyant, his nose terrific, his mouth implacable. And yet, after a while, when he slowly turned and looked at me, fixedly, I perceived that in spite of this portentous mask, he was a very mild old man. I was sure he even would have been glad to smile, but, evidently, his facial muscles were too stiff — they had taken a different fold, once for all. I wondered whether he was demented, but I dismissed the idea; the fixed glitter in his eye was not that of insanity. What his face really expressed was deep and simple sadness; his heart perhaps was broken, but his brain was intact. His dress was shabby but neat, and his old blue cloak had known half a century's brushing.

I HASTENED to make some observation upon the exceptional softness of the day, and he answered me in a gentle, mellow voice, which it was almost startling to hear proceed from such bellicose lips.

"This is a very comfortable place," he presently added.

"I am fond of walking in graveyards," I rejoined deliberately; flattering myself that I had struck a vein that might lead to something.

I was encouraged; he turned

and fixed me with his duskily glowing eyes. Then very gravely — "Walking, yes. Take all your exercise now. Some day you will have to settle down in a graveyard in a fixed position."

"Very true," said I. "But you know there are some people who are said to take exercise even after that day."

He had been looking at me still; at this he looked away.

"You don't understand?" I said, gently.

He continued to gaze straight before him.

"Some people, you know, walk about after death," I went on.

At last he turned, and looked at me more portentously than ever. "You don't believe that," he said simply.

"How do you know I don't?"

"Because you are young and foolish." This was said without acerbity — even kindly; but in the tone of an old man whose consciousness of his own heavy experience made everything else seem light.

"I am certainly young," I answered; "but I don't think that, on the whole, I am foolish. But say I don't believe in ghosts — most people would be on my side."

"Most people are fools!" said the old man.

I LET THE question rest, and talked of other things. My companion seemed on his guard, he eyed me defiantly, and made

brief answers to my remarks; but I nevertheless gathered an impression that our meeting was an agreeable thing to him, and even a social incident of some importance. He was evidently a lonely creature, and his opportunities for gossip were rare. He had had troubles, and they had detached him from the world, and driven him back upon himself, but the social chord in his antiquated soul was not entirely broken, and I was sure he was gratified to find that it could still feebly resound. At last, he began to ask questions himself; he inquired whether I was a student.

"I am a student of divinity," I answered.

"Of divinity?"

"Of theology. I am studying for the ministry."

At this he eyed me with peculiar intensity — after which his gaze wandered away again. "There are certain things you ought to know, then," he said at last.

"I have a great desire for knowledge," I answered. "What things do you mean?"

He looked at me again awhile, but without heeding my question.

"I like your appearance," he said. "You seem to me a sober lad."

"Oh, I am perfectly sober!" I exclaimed — yet departing for a moment from my soberness.

"I think you are fair-minded," he went on.

"I don't any longer strike you as foolish, then?" I asked.

"I stick to what I said about people who deny the power of departed spirits to return. They *are* fools!" And he rapped fiercely with his staff on the earth.

I hesitated a moment, and then, abruptly, "You have seen a ghost!" I said.

He appeared not at all startled.

"You are right, sir!" he answered with great dignity. "With me it's not a matter of cold theory — I have not had to pry into old books to learn what to believe. *I know!* With these eyes I have beheld the departed spirit standing before me as near as you are!" And his eyes, as he spoke, certainly looked as if they had rested upon strange things.

I was irresistibly impressed — I was touched with credulity.

"And was it very terrible?" I asked.

"I am an old soldier — I am not afraid!"

"When was it? — where was it?" I asked.

HE LOOKED at me mistrustfully, and I saw that I was going too fast.

"Excuse me from going into particulars," he said. "I am not at liberty to speak more fully. I have told you so much, because I cannot bear to hear this subject spoken of lightly. Remem-

ber in future, that you have seen a very honest old man who told you — on his honor — that he had seen a ghost!" And he got up, as if he thought he had said enough. Reserve, shyness, pride, the fear of being laughed at, the memory, possibly, of former strokes of sarcasm — all this, on one side, had its weight with him; but I suspected that on the other, his tongue was loosened by the garrulity of old age, the sense of solitude, and the need of sympathy — and perhaps, also, by the friendliness which he had been so good as to express toward myself. Evidently it would be unwise to press him, but I hoped to see him again.

"To give greater weight to my words," he added, "let me mention my name — Captain Diamond, sir. I have seen service."

"I hope I may have the pleasure of meeting you again," I said.

"The same to you, sir!" And brandishing his stick portentously — though with the friendliest intentions — he marched stiffly away.

I ASKED two or three persons — selected with discretion — whether they knew anything about Captain Diamond, but they were quite unable to enlighten me. At last, suddenly, I smote my forehead, and dubbing myself a dolt, remember-

ed that I was neglecting a source of information to which I had never applied in vain. The excellent person at whose table I had habitually dined, and who dispensed hospitality to students at so much a week, had a sister as good as herself, and of conversational power more varied. The sister, who was known as Miss Deborah, was an old maid in all the force of the term. She was deformed, and she never went out of the house; she sat all day at the window, between a bird-cage and a flower-pot, stitching small linen articles — mysterious bands and frills. She wielded, I was assured, an exquisite needle, and her work was highly prized. In spite of her deformity and her confinement, she had a little, fresh, round face, and an imperturbable serenity of spirit. She had also a very quick little wit of her own, she was extremely observant, and she had a high relish for a friendly chat. Nothing pleased her so much as to have you — especially, I think, if you were a young divinity student — move your chair near her sunny window, and settle yourself for twenty minutes' "talk."

"Well, sir," she used always to say, "what is the latest monstrosity in Biblical criticism?" — for she used to pretend to be horrified at the rationalistic tendency of the age. But she was an inexorable little philosopher, and I am convinced that she was a

keener rationalist than any of us, and that, if she had chosen, she could have propounded questions that would have made the boldest of us wince. Her window commanded the whole town — or rather, the whole country. Knowledge came to her as she sat singing, with her little, cracked voice, in her low rocking chair. She was the first to learn everything, and the last to forget it. She had the town gossip at her fingers' ends, and she knew everything about people she had never seen. When I asked her how she had acquired her learning, she said simply — "Oh, I observe!"

"Observe closely enough," she once said, "and it doesn't matter where you are. You may be in a pitch-dark closet. All you want is something to start with; one thing leads to another, and all things are mixed up. Shut me up in a dark closet and I will observe after a while, that some places in it are darker than others. After that (give me time), and I will tell you what the President of the United States is going to have for dinner." Once I paid her a compliment. "Your observation," I said, "is as fine as your needle, and your statements are as true as your stitches."

OF COURSE Miss Deborah had heard of Captain Diamond. He had been much talked about many years before, but he had

survived the scandal that attached to his name.

"What was the scandal?" I asked.

"He killed his daughter."

"Killed her?" I cried; "How so?"

"Oh, not with a pistol, or a dagger, or a dose of arsenic! With his tongue. Talk of women's tongues! He cursed her — with some horrible oath — and she died!"

"What had she done?"

"She had received a visit from a young man who loved her, and whom he had forbidden the house."

"The house," I said — "ah yes! The house is out in the country, two or three miles from here, on a lonely crossroad."

Miss Deborah looked sharply at me, as she bit her thread.

"Ah, you know about the house?" she said.

"A little," I answered; "I have seen it. But I want you to tell me more."

But here Miss Deborah betrayed an incommunicativeness which was most unusual.

"You wouldn't call me superstitious, would you?" she asked.

"You? — you are the quintessence of pure reason."

"Well, every thread has its rotten place, and every needle its grain of rust. I would rather not talk about that house."

"You have no idea how you excite my curiosity!" I said.

"I can feel for you. But it

would make me very nervous."

"What harm can come to you?" I asked.

"Some harm came to a friend of mine." And Miss Deborah gave a very positive nod.

"What had your friend done?"

"She had told me Captain Diamond's secret, which he had told her with a mighty mystery. She had been an old flame of his, and he took her into his confidence. He bade her tell no one, and assured her that if she did, something dreadful would happen to her."

"And what happened to her?"

"She died."

"Oh, we are all mortal!" I said. "Had she given him a promise?"

"She had not taken it seriously, she had not believed him. She repeated the story to me, and three days afterward, she was taken with inflammation of the lungs. A month afterward, here where I sit now, I was stitching her grave-clothes. Since then, I have never mentioned what she told me."

"Was it very strange?"

"It was strange, but it was ridiculous too. It is a thing to make you shudder and to make you laugh, both. But you can't worry it out of me. I am sure that if I were to tell you, I should immediately break a needle in my finger, and die the next week of lockjaw."

I retired, and urged Miss Deborah no further; but every

two or three days, after dinner, I came and sat down by her rocking chair. I made no further allusion to Captain Diamond; I sat silent, clipping tape with her scissors. At last, one day, she told me I was looking poorly. I was pale.

"I am dying of curiosity," I said. "I have lost my appetite. I have eaten no dinner."

"Remember Blue Beard's wife!" said Miss Deborah.

"One may as well perish by the sword as by famine!" I answered.

STILL SHE SAID nothing, and at last I rose with a melodramatic sigh and departed. As I reached the door she called me and pointed to the chair I had vacated. "I never was hard-hearted," she said. "Sit down, and if we are to perish, may we at least perish together."

And then, in very few words, she communicated what she knew of Captain Diamond's secret. "He was a very high-tempered old man, and though he was very fond of his daughter, his will was law. He had picked out a husband for her, and given her due notice. Her mother was dead, and they lived alone together. The house had been Mrs. Diamond's own marriage portion: the Captain, I believe, hadn't a penny. After his marriage they had come to live there, and he had begun to work the farm. The poor girl's

lover was a young man with whiskers from Boston. The Captain came in one evening and found them together; he collared the young man, and hurled a terrible curse at the poor girl. The young man cried that she was his wife, and he asked her if it was true. She said, 'No!' Thereupon Captain Diamond, his fury growing fiercer, repeated his imprecation, ordered her out of the house, and disowned her forever. She swooned away, but her father went raging off and left her. Several hours later, he came back and found the house empty. On the table was a note from the young man telling him that he had killed his daughter, repeating the assurance that she was his own wife, and declaring that he himself claimed the sole right to commit her remains to earth. He had carried the body away in a gig! Captain Diamond wrote him a dreadful note in answer, saying that he didn't believe his daughter was dead, but that, whether or no, she was dead to him.

"A WEEK later, in the middle of the night, he saw her ghost. Then, I suppose, he was convinced. The ghost reappeared several times, and finally began regularly to haunt the house. It made the old man very uncomfortable, for little by little his passion had passed away, and he was given up to grief. He determined at last to leave the place, and tried

to sell it or rent it; but meanwhile the story had gone abroad, the ghost had been seen by other persons, the house had a bad name, and it was impossible to dispose of it. With the farm, it was the old man's only property, and his only means of subsistence; if he could neither live in it nor rent it he was beggared. But the ghost had no mercy, as he had had none. He struggled for six months, and at last he broke down. He put on his old blue cloak and took up his staff, and prepared to wander away and beg his bread. Then the ghost relented, and proposed a compromise. 'Leave the house to me!' it said; 'I have marked it for my own. Go off and live elsewhere. But to enable you to live, I will be your tenant, since you can find no other. I will hire the house of you and pay you a certain rent.' And the ghost named a sum. The old man consented, and he goes every quarter to collect his rent!"

I LAUGHED at this recital, but I confess I shuddered too, for my own observation had exactly confirmed it. Had I not been witness of one of the Captain's quarterly visits, had I not all but seen him sit watching his spectral tenant count out the rent money, and when he trudged away in the dark, had he not a little bag of strangely gotten coin hidden in the folds of his old blue cloak? I imparted none

of these reflections to Miss Deborah, for I was determined that my observations should have a sequel, and I promised myself the pleasure of treating her to my story in its full maturity. "Captain Diamond," I asked, "has no other known means of subsistence?"

"None whatever. He toils not, neither does he spin — his ghost supports him. A haunted house is valuable property!"

"And in what coin does the ghost pay?"

"In good American gold and silver. It has only this peculiarity — that the pieces are all dated before the young girl's death. It's a strange mixture of matter and spirit!"

"And does the ghost do things handsomely; is the rent large?"

"The old man, I believe, lives decently, and has his pipe and his glass. He took a little house down by the river; the door is sidewise to the street, and there is a little garden before it. There he spends his days, and has an old colored woman to do for him. Some years ago, he used to wander about a good deal, he was a familiar figure in the town, and most people knew his legend. But of late he has drawn back into his shell; he sits over his fire, and curiosity has forgotten him. I suppose he is falling into his dotage. But I am sure, I trust," said Miss Deborah in conclusion, "that he won't outlive his faculties or his powers

of locomotion, for, if I remember rightly, it was part of the bargain that he should come in person to collect his rent."

We neither of us seemed likely to suffer any especial penalty for Miss Deborah's indiscretion; I found her, day after day, singeing over her work, neither more nor less active than usual. For myself, I boldly pursued my observations. I went again, more than once, to the graveyard, but I was disappointed in my hope of finding Captain Diamond there. I had a prospect, however, which afforded me compensation. I shrewdly inferred that the old man's quarterly pilgrimages were made upon the last day of the old quarter. My first sight of him had been on the 31st of December, and it was probable that he would return to his haunted home on the last day of March. This was near at hand; at last it arrived. I betook myself late in the afternoon to the old house on the crossroad, supposing that the hour of twilight was the appointed season. I was not wrong. I had been hovering about for a short time, feeling very much like a restless ghost myself, when he appeared in the same manner as before, and wearing the same costume. I again concealed myself, and saw him enter the house with the ceremonial which he had used on the former occasion. A light appeared successively in the crevice of each

pair of shutters, and I opened the window which had yielded to my importunity before. Again I saw the great shadow on the wall, motionless and solemn. But I saw nothing else. The old man reappeared at last, made his fantastic salaam before the old house, and crept away into the dusk.

ONE DAY, more than a month after this, I met him again at Mount Auburn. The air was full of the voice of spring; the birds had come back and were twittering over their winter's travels, and a mild west wind was making a thin murmur in the raw verdure. He was seated on a bench in the sun, still muffled in his enormous mantle, and he recognized me as soon as I approached him. He nodded at me as if he were an old Bashaw giving the signal for my decapitation, but it was apparent that he was pleased to see me.

"I have looked for you here more than once," I said. "You don't come often."

"What did you want of me?" he asked.

"I wanted to enjoy your conversation. I did so greatly when I met you here before."

"You found me amusing?"

"Interesting!" I said.

"You didn't think me cracked?"

"Cracked? — My dear sir —!" I protested.

"I'm the sanest man in the

country. I know that is what insane people always say; but generally they can't prove it. I can!"

"I believe it," I said. "But I am curious to know how such a thing can be proved."

HE WAS silent awhile.

"I will tell you. I once committed, unintentionally, a great crime. Now I pay the penalty. I give up my life to it. I don't shirk it; I face it squarely, knowing perfectly what it is. I haven't tried to bluff it off; I haven't begged off from it; I haven't run away from it. The penalty is terrible, but I have accepted it. I have been a philosopher!

"If I were a Catholic, I might have turned monk, and spent the rest of my life in fasting and praying. That is no penalty; that is an evasion. I might have blown my brains out — I might have gone mad. I wouldn't do either. I would simply face the music, take the consequences. As I say, they are awful! I take them on certain days, four times a year. So it has been these twenty years; so it will be as long as I last. It's my business; it's my avocation. That's the way I feel about it. I call that reasonable!"

"Admirably so!" I said. "But you fill me with curiosity and with compassion."

"Especially with curiosity," he said, cunningly.

"Why," I answered, "if I know

exactly what you suffer I can pity you more."

"I'm much obliged. I don't want your pity; it won't help me. I'll tell you something, but it's not for myself; it's for your own sake." He paused a long time and looked all round him, as if for chance eavesdroppers. I anxiously awaited his revelation, but he disappointed me. "Are you still studying theology?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," I answered, perhaps with a shade of irritation. "It's a thing one can't learn in six months."

"I should think not, so long as you have nothing but your books. Do you know the proverb, 'A grain of experience is worth a pound of precept'? I'm a great theologian."

"Ah, you have had experience," I murmured sympathetically.

"You have read about the immortality of the soul; you have seen Jonathan Edwards and Dr. Hopkins chopping logic over it, and deciding, by chapter and verse, that it is true. But I have seen it with these eyes; I have touched it with these hands!" And the old man held up his rugged old fists and shook them portentously. "That's better!" he went on; "but I have bought it dearly. You had better take it from the books — evidently you always will. You are a very good young man; you will never

have a crime on your conscience."

I ANSWERED with some juvenile fatuity, that I certainly hoped I had my share of human passions, good young man and prospective Doctor of Divinity as I was.

"Ah, but you have a nice, quiet little temper," he said. "So have I — now! But once I was very brutal — very brutal. You ought to know that such things are. I killed my own child."

"Your own child?"

"I struck her down to the earth and left her to die. They could not hang me, for it was not with my hand I struck her. It was with foul and damnable words. That makes a difference; it's a grand law we live under! Well, sir, I can answer for it that *her* soul is immortal. We have an appointment to meet four times a year, and then I catch it!"

"She has never forgiven you?"

"She has forgiven me as the angels forgive! That's what I can't stand — the soft, quiet way she looks at me. I'd rather she twisted a knife about in my heart — O Lord, Lord, Lord!" and Captain Diamond bowed his head over his stick, and leaned his forehead on his crossed hands.

I was impressed and moved, and his attitude seemed for the moment a check to further questions. Before I ventured to ask

him anything more, he slowly rose and pulled his old cloak around him. He was unused to talking about his troubles, and his memories overwhelmed him. "I must go my way," he said; "I must be creeping along."

"I shall perhaps meet you here again," I said.

"Oh, I'm a stiff-jointed old fellow," he answered, "and this is rather far for me to come. I have to reserve myself. I have sat sometimes a month at a time smoking my pipe in my chair. But I should like to see you again." And he stopped and looked at me, terribly and kindly. "Some day, perhaps, I shall be glad to be able to lay my hand on a young, unperverted soul. If a man can make a friend, it is always something gained. What is your name?"

I HAD IN my pocket a small volume of Pascal's "Thoughts," on the flyleaf of which were written my name and address. I took it out and offered it to my old friend. "Pray keep this little book," I said. "It is one I am very fond of, and it will tell you something about me."

He took it and turned it over slowly, then looking up at me with a scowl of gratitude, "I'm not much of a reader," he said; "but I won't refuse the first present I shall have received since — my troubles; and the last. Thank you, sir!" And with the

little book in his hand he took his departure.

I was left to imagine him for some weeks after that sitting solitary in his armchair with his pipe. I had not another glimpse of him. But I was awaiting my chance, and on the last day of June, another quarter having elapsed, I deemed that it had come. The evening dusk in June falls late, and I was impatient for its coming. At last, toward the end of a lovely summer's day, I revisited Captain Diamonds' property. Everything now was green around it save the blighted orchard in its rear, but its own immitigable grayness and sadness were as striking as when I had first beheld it beneath a December sky. As I drew near it, I saw that I was late for my purpose, for my purpose had simply been to step forward on Captain Diamond's arrival, and bravely ask him to let me go in with him. He had preceded me, and there were lights already in the windows. I was unwilling, of course, to disturb him during his ghostly interview, and I waited till he came forth. The lights disappeared in the course of time; then the door opened and Captain Diamond stole out. That evening he made no bow to the haunted house, for the first object he beheld was his fair-minded young friend planted, modestly but firmly, near the doorstep. He stopped short, looking at me, and this time his

terrible scowl was in keeping with the situation.

"I knew you were here," I said. "I came on purpose."

HE SEEMED dismayed, and looked round at the house uneasily.

"I beg your pardon if I have ventured too far," I added, "but you know you have encouraged me."

"How did you know I was here?"

"I reasoned it out. You told me half your story, and I guessed the other half. I am a great observer, and I had noticed this house in passing. It seemed to me to have a mystery. When you kindly confided to me that you saw spirits, I was sure that it could only be here that you saw them."

"You are mighty clever," cried the old man. "And what brought you here this evening?"

I was obliged to evade this question.

"Oh, I often come; I like to look at the house — it fascinates me."

He turned and looked up at it himself. "It's nothing to look at outside." He was evidently quite unaware of its peculiar outward appearance, and this odd fact, communicated to me thus in the twilight, and under the very brow of the sinister dwelling, seemed to make his vision of the strange things within more real.

"I have been hoping," I said, "for a chance to see the inside. I thought I might find you here, and that you would let me go in with you. I should like to see what you see."

He seemed confounded by my boldness, but not altogether displeased. He laid his hand on my arm. "Do you know what I see?" he asked.

"How can I know, except as you said the other day, by experience? I want to have the experience. Pray, open the door and take me in."

CAPTAIN DIAMOND'S brilliant eyes expanded beneath their dusky brows, and after holding his breath a moment, he indulged in the first and last apology for a laugh by which I was to see his solemn visage contorted. It was profoundly grotesque, but it was perfectly noiseless. "Take you in?" he softly growled. "I wouldn't go in again before my time's up for a thousand times that sum." And he thrust out his hand from the folds of his cloak and exhibited a small agglomeration of coin, knotted into the corner of an old silk pocket-handkerchief. "I stick to my bargain no less, but no more!"

"But you told me the first time I had the pleasure of talking with you that it was not so terrible."

"I don't say it's terrible —

now. But it's damned disagreeable!"

This adjective was uttered with a force that made me hesitate and reflect. While I did so, I thought I heard a slight movement of one of the window-shutters above us. I looked up, but everything seemed motionless. Captain Diamond, too, had been thinking; suddenly he turned toward the house. "If you will go in alone," he said, "you are welcome."

"Will you wait for me here?"

"Yes, you will not stop long."

"But the house is pitch dark  
When you go you have lights."

He thrust his hand into the depths of his cloak and produced some matches. "Take these," he said. "You will find two candlesticks with candles on the table in the hall. Light them, take one in each hand and go ahead."

"Where shall I go?"

"Anywhere — everywhere. You can trust the ghost to find you."

I WILL NOT pretend to deny that by this time my heart was beating. And yet I imagine I motioned the old man with a sufficiently dignified gesture to open the door. I had made up my mind that there was in fact a ghost. I had conceded the premise. Only I had assured myself that once the mind was prepared, and the thing was not a surprise, it was possible to keep

cool. Captain Diamond turned the lock, flung open the door, and bowed low to me as I passed in. I stood in the darkness, and heard the door close behind me. For some moments, I stirred neither finger nor toe; I stared bravely into the, impenetrable dusk. But I saw nothing and heard nothing, and at last I struck a match. On the table were two old brass candlesticks rusty from disuse. I lighted the candles and began my tour of exploration.

A wide staircase rose in front of me, guarded by an antique balustrade of that rigidly delicate carving which is found so often in old New England houses. I postponed ascending it, and turned into the room on my right. This was an old-fashioned parlor, meagerly furnished, and musty with the absence of human life. I raised my two lights aloft and saw nothing but its empty chairs and its blank walls. Behind it was the room into which I had peeped from without, and which, in fact, communicated with it, as I had supposed, by folding doors. Here, too, I found myself confronted by no menacing spector. I crossed the hall again, and visited the rooms on the other side; a dining-room in front, where I might have written my name with my finger in the deep dust of the great square table; a kitchen behind with its pots and pans eternally cold. All this was

hard and grim, but it was not formidable. I came back into the hall, and walked to the foot of the staircase, holding up my candles; to ascend required a fresh effort, and I was scanning the gloom above. Suddenly, with an inexpressible sensation, I became aware that this gloom was animated; it seemed to move and gather itself together.

Slowly — I say slowly, for to my tense expectancy the instants appeared ages — it took the shape of a large, definite figure, and this figure advanced and stood at the top of the stairs. I frankly confess that by this time I was conscious of a feeling to which I am in duty bound to apply the vulgar name of fear. I may poetize it and call it Dread, with a capital letter; it was at any rate the feeling that makes a man yield ground. I measured it as it grew, and it seemed perfectly irresistible; for it did not appear to come from within but from without, and to be embodied in the dark image at the head of the staircase. After a fashion I reasoned — I remember reasoning. I said to myself, "I had always thought ghosts were white and transparent; this is a thing of thick shadows, densely opaque." I reminded myself that the occasion was momentous, and that if fear were to overcome me I should gather all possible impressions while my wits remained. I stepped back, foot behind foot, with

my eyes still on the figure and placed my candles on the table. I was perfectly conscious that the proper thing was to ascend the stairs resolutely, face to face with the image, but the soles of my shoes seemed suddenly to have been transformed into leaden weights. I had got what I wanted; I was seeing the ghost. I tried to look at the figure distinctly so that I could remember it, and fairly claim, afterward, not to have lost my self-possession. I even asked myself how long it was expected I should stand looking, and how soon I could honorably retire.

ALL THIS, of course, passed through my mind with extreme rapidity, and it was checked by a further movement on the part of the figure. Two white hands appeared in the dark perpendicular mass, and were slowly raised to what seemed to be the level of the head. Here they were pressed together, over the region of the face, and then they were removed, and the face was disclosed. It was dim, white, strange, in every way ghostly. It looked down at me for an instant, after which one of the hands was raised again, slowly, and waved to and fro before it. There was something very singular in this gesture; it seemed to denote resentment and dismissal, and yet it had a sort of trivial, familiar motion. Familiarity on the part of the haunting Pres-

ence had not entered into my calculations, and did not strike me pleasantly. I agreed with Captain Diamond that it was "damned disagreeable." I was pervaded by an intense desire to make an orderly, and, if possible, a graceful retreat. I wished to do it gallantly, and it seemed to me that it would be gallant to blow out my candles. I turned and did so, punctiliously, and then I made my way to the door, groped a moment and opened it. The outer light, almost extinct as it was, entered for a moment, played over the dusty depths of the house and showed me the solid shadow.

Standing on the grass, bent over his stick, under the early glimmering stars, I found Captain Diamond. He looked up at me fixedly for a moment, but asked no questions, and then he went and locked the door. This duty performed, he discharged the other — made his obeisance like the priest before the altar — and then without heeding me further, took his departure.

A FEW DAYS later, I suspended my studies and went off for the summer's vacation. I was absent for several weeks, during which I had plenty of leisure to analyze my impressions of the supernatural. I took some satisfaction in the reflection that I had not been ignobly terrified; I had not bolted nor swooned — I had proceeded with dignity.

Nevertheless, I was certainly more comfortable when I had put thirty miles between me and the scene of my exploit, and I continued for many days to prefer the daylight to the dark. My nerves had been powerfully excited; of this I was particularly conscious when, under the influence of the drowsy air of the seaside, my excitement began slowly to ebb. As it disappeared, I attempted to take a sternly rational view of my experience. Certainly I had seen *something* — that was not fancy; but what had I seen? I regretted extremely now that I had not been bolder, that I had not gone nearer and inspected the apparition more minutely. But it was very well to talk; I had done as much as any man in the circumstances would have dared; it was indeed a physical impossibility that I should have advanced. Was not this paralyzation of my powers in itself a supernatural influence? Not necessarily, perhaps, for a sham ghost that one accepted might do as much execution as a real ghost. But why had I so easily accepted the sable phantom that waved its hand? Why had it so impressed itself? Unquestionably, true or false, it was a very clever phantom. I greatly preferred that it should have been true — in the first place because I did not care to have shivered and shaken for nothing, and in the second place because to have seen a well-au-

thenticated goblin is, as things go, a feather in a quiet man's cap. I tried, therefore, to let my vision rest and to stop turning it over. But an impulse stronger than my will recurred at intervals and set a mocking question on my lips. Granted that the apparition was Captain Diamond's daughter; if it was she it certainly was her spirit. But was it not her spirit and something more?

The middle of September saw me again established among the theologic shades, but I made no haste to revisit the haunted house.

THE LAST OF the month approached — the term of another quarter with poor Captain Diamond — and found me indisposed to disturb his pilgrimage on this occasion; though I confess that I thought with a good deal of compassion of the feeble old man trudging away, lonely, in the autumn dusk, on his extraordinary errand. On the thirtieth of September, at noon-day, I was drowsing over a heavy octavo, when I heard a feeble rap at my door. I replied with an invitation to enter, but as this produced no effect I repaired to the door and opened it. Before me stood an elderly negress with her head bound in a scarlet turban, and a white handkerchief folded across her bosom. She looked at me intently and in silence; she had that air

of supreme gravity and decency which aged persons of her race so often wear. I stood interrogative, and at last, drawing her hand from her ample pocket, she held up a little book. It was the copy of Pascal's "Thoughts" that I had given to Captain Diamond.

"Please, sir," she said, very mildly, "do you know this book?"

"Perfectly," said I, "my name is on the fly-leaf."

"It is your name—no other?"

"I will write my name if you like, and you can compare them," I answered.

She was silent a moment and then, with dignity — "It would be useless, sir," she said, "I can't read. If you will give me your word that is enough. I come," she went on, "from the gentleman to whom you gave the book. He told me to carry it as a token — a token — that is what he called it. He is right down sick, and he wants to see you."

"Captain Diamond — sick?" I cried. "Is his illness serious?"

"He is very bad — he is all gone."

I EXPRESSED my regret and sympathy, and offered to go to him immediately, if his sable messenger would show me the way. She assented deferentially, and in a few moments I was following her along the sunny streets, feeling very much like a personage in the Arabian Nights, led to a postern gate by an Ethiopian slave. My own

conductress directed her steps toward the river and stopped at a decent little yellow house in one of the streets that descend to it. She quickly opened the door and let me in, and I very soon found myself in the presence of my old friend. He was in bed, in a darkened room, and evidently in a very feeble state. He lay back on his pillow staring before him, with his bristling hair more erect than ever, and his intensely dark and bright old eyes touched with the glitter of fever. His apartment was humble and scrupulously neat, and I could see that my dusky guide was a faithful servant. Captain Diamond, lying there rigid and pale on his white sheets, resembled some ruggedly carven figure on the lid of a Gothic tomb. He looked at me silently, and my companion withdrew and left us alone.

"Yes, it's you," he said, at last, "it's you, that good young man. There is no mistake, is there?"

"I hope not; I believe I'm a good young man. But I am very sorry you are ill. What can I do for you?"

"I am very bad, very bad; my poor old bones ache so!" and, groaning portentously, he tried to turn toward me.

I questioned him about the nature of his malady and the length of time he had been in bed, but he barely heeded me; he seemed impatient to speak of

something else. He grasped my sleeve, pulled me toward him, and whispered quickly: "You know my time's up!"

"Oh, I trust not," I said, mistaking his meaning. "I shall certainly see you on your legs again."

"God knows!" he cried. "But I don't mean I'm dying; not yet a bit. What I mean is, I'm due at the house. This is rent-day."

"Oh, exactly! But you can't go."

"I can't go. It's awful. I shall lose my money. If I am dying, I want it all the same. I want to pay the doctor. I want to be buried like a respectable man."

"It is this evening?" I asked.

"This evening at sunset, sharp."

HE LAY STARING at me, and, as I looked at him in return, I suddenly understood his motive in sending for me. Morally, as it came into my thought, I winced. But, I suppose I looked unperturbed, for he continued in the same tone. "I can't lose my money. Someone else must go. I asked Belinda; but she won't hear of it."

"You believe the money will be paid to another person?"

"We can try, at least. I have never failed before and I don't know. But, if you say I'm as sick as a dog, that my old bones ache, that I'm dying, perhaps she'll trust you. She don't want me to starve!"

"You would like me to go in your place, then?"

"You have been there once; you know what it is. Are you afraid?"

I hesitated.

"Give me three minutes to reflect," I said, "and I will tell you." My glance wandered over the room and rested on the various objects that spoke of the threadbare, decent poverty of its occupant. There seemed to be a mute appeal to my pity and my resolution in their cracked and faded sparseness.

Meanwhile Captain Diamond continued, feebly: "I think she'd trust you, as I have trusted you; she'll like your face; she'll see there is no harm in you. It's a hundred and thirty-three dollars, exactly. Be sure you put them into a safe place."

"Yes," I said at last, "I will go, and, so far as it depends upon me, you shall have the money by nine o'clock tonight."

He seemed greatly relieved; he took my hand and faintly pressed it, and soon afterward I withdrew. I tried for the rest of the day not to think of my evening's work, but, of course, I thought of nothing else. I will not deny that I was nervous; I was, in fact, greatly excited, and I spent my time in alternately hoping that the mystery should prove less deep than it appeared, and yet fearing that it might prove too shallow. The hours passed very slowly, but, as the

afternoon began to wane, I started on my mission. On the way, I stopped at Captain Diamond's modest dwelling, to ask how he was doing, and to receive such last instructions as he might desire to lay upon me. The old negress, gravely and inscrutably placid, admitted me, and, in answer to my inquiries, said that the Captain was very low; he had sunk since the morning.

"You must be right smart," she said, "if you want to get back before he drops off."

A GLANCE assured me that she knew of my projected expedition, though, in her own opaque black pupil, there was not a gleam of self-betrayal.

"But why should Captain Diamond drop off?" I asked. "He certainly seems very weak; but I cannot make out that he has any definite disease."

"His disease is old age," she said, sententiously.

"But he is not so old as that; sixty-seven or sixty-eight, at most."

She was silent a moment.

"He's worn out; he's used up; he can't stand it any longer."

"Can I see him a moment?" I asked; upon which she led me again to his room.

He was lying in the same way as when I had left him, except that his eyes were closed. But he seemed very "low," as she had said, and he had very little pulse.

Nevertheless, I further learned the doctor had been there in the afternoon and professed himself satisfied. "He don't know what's been going on," said Belinda, curtly.

The old man stirred a little, opened his eyes, and after some time recognized me.

"I'm going, you know," I said. "I'm going for your money. Have you anything more to say?" He raised himself slowly, and with a painful effort, against his pillows; but he seemed hardly to understand me. "The house, you know," I said. "Your daughter."

He rubbed his forehead, slowly, awhile, and at last, his comprehension awoke. "Ah, yes," he murmured, "I trust you. A hundred and thirty-three dollars. In old pieces — all in old pieces." Then he added more vigorously, and with a brightening eye: "Be very respectful — be very polite. If not — if not . . ." and his voice failed again.

"Oh, I certainly shall be," I said with a rather forced smile. "But, if not?"

"If not, I shall know it!" he said, very gravely. And with this, his eyes closed and he sunk down again.

I TOOK MY departure and pursued my journey with a sufficiently resolute step. When I reached the house, I made a propitiatory bow in front of it, in emulation of Captain Diamond. I had timed my walk so as to be

able to enter without delay; night had already fallen. I turned the key, opened the door and shut it behind me. Then I struck a light, and found the two candlesticks I had used before, standing on the tables in the entry. I applied a match to both of them, took them up and went into the parlor. It was empty, and though I waited awhile, it remained empty. I passed them into the other rooms on the same floor, and no dark image rose before me to check my steps. At last, I came out into the hall again, and stood weighing the question of going upstairs. The staircase had been the scene of my discomfiture before, and I approached it with profound mistrust. At the foot, I paused, looking up, with my hand on the balustrade. I was acutely expectant, and my expectation was justified. Slowly, in the darkness above, the black figure that I had seen before took shape. It was not an illusion; it was a figure, and the same. I gave it time to define itself, and watched it stand and look down at me with its hidden face. Then, deliberately, I lifted my voice and spoke.

"I have come in place of Captain Diamond, at his request," I said. "He is very ill; he is unable to leave his bed. He earnestly begs that you will pay the money to me; I will immediately carry it to him." The figure stood motionless, giving no sign. "Captain Diamond would have

come if he were able to move," I added, in a moment, appealingly; "but, he is utterly unable."

AT THIS the figure slowly unveiled its face and showed me a dim, white mask; then it began slowly to descend the stairs. Instinctively I fell back before it, retreating to the door of the front sitting-room. With my eyes still fixed on it, I moved backward across the threshold; then I stopped in the middle of the room and set down my lights. The figure advanced; it seemed to be that of a tall woman, dressed in various black crepe. As it drew near, I saw that it had a perfectly human face, though it looked extremely pale and sad. We stood gazing at each other; my agitation had completely vanished; I was only deeply interested.

"Is my father dangerously ill?" said the apparition.

At the sound of its voice — gentle, tremulous, and perfectly human — I started forward; I felt a rebound of excitement. I drew a long breath, I gave a sort of cry, for what I saw before me was not a disembodied spirit, but a beautiful woman, an audacious actress. Instinctively, irresistibly, by the force of reaction against my credulity, I stretched out my hand and seized the long veil that muffled her head. I gave it a violent jerk, dragged it nearly off, and stood staring at a large fair person, of

about five-and-thirty. I comprehended her at a glance, her long black dress, her pale, sorrow-worn face, painted to look paler, her very fine eyes — the color of her father's — and her sense of outrage at my movement.

"My father, I suppose," she cried, "did not send you here to insult me!" and she turned away rapidly, took up one of the candles and moved toward the door. Here she paused, looked at me again, hesitated, and then drew a purse from her pocket and flung it down on the floor. "There is your money!" she said, majestically.

I STOOD THERE, wavering between amazement and shame, and saw her pass out into the hall. Then I picked up the purse. The next moment, I heard a loud shriek and a crash of something dropping, and she came staggering back into the room without her light.

"My father — my father!" she cried; and with parted lips and dilated eyes, she rushed toward me.

"Your father — where?" I demanded.

"In the hall, at the foot of the stairs."

I stepped forward to go out, but she seized my arm.

"He's is in white," she cried, "in his shirt. It's not he!"

"Why, your father is in his house, in his bed, extremely ill," I answered.

She looked at me fixedly, with searching eyes.

"Dying?"

"I hope not," I stuttered.

She gave a long moan and covered her face with her hands.

"Oh, heavens, I have seen his ghost!" she cried.

She still held my arm, she seemed too terrified to release it. "His ghost!" I echoed, wondering.

"It's the punishment of my long folly!" she went on.

"Ah," said I, "it's the punishment of my indiscretion — of my violence!"

"Take me away, take me away!" she cried, still clinging to my arm. "Not there" — as I was turning toward the hall and the front door — "not there, for pity's sake! By this door — the back entrance." And snatching the other candles from the table, she led me through the neighboring room into the back part of the house. Here was a door opening from a sort of scullery into the orchard. I turned the rusty lock and we passed out and stood in the cool air, beneath the stars. Here my companion gathered her black drapery about her, and stood for a moment, hesitating. I had been infinitely flurried, but my curiosity touching her was uppermost. Agitated, pale, picturesque, she looked, in the early evening light, very beautiful.

"You have been playing all

these years a most extraordinary game," I said.

She looked at me somberly, and seemed disinclined to reply. "I came in perfect good faith," I went on. "The last time — three months ago — you remember? — you greatly frightened me."

"Of course it was an extraordinary game," she answered at last. "But it was the only way."

"Had he not forgiven you?"

"So long as he thought me dead, yes. There have been things in my life he could not forgive."

I hesitated and then — "And where is your husband?" I asked.

"I have no husband — I have never had a husband."

She made a gesture which checked further questions, and moved rapidly away. I walked with her round the house to the road, and she kept murmuring — "It was he — it was he!" When we reached the road she stopped, and asked me which way I was going. I pointed to the road by which I had come, and she said — "I take the other. You are going to my father's?" she added.

"Directly," I said.

"Will you let me know tomorrow what you have found?"

"With pleasure. But how shall I communicate with you?"

She seemed at a loss, and looked about her. "Write a few words," she said, "and put them under that stone?" And she

pointed to one of the lava slabs that bordered the old well. I gave her my promise to comply, and she turned away. "I know my road," she said. "Everything is arranged. It's an old story.

SHE LEFT ME with a rapid step, and as she receded into the darkness, resumed, with the dark flowing lines of her drapery, the phantasmal appearance with which she had at first appeared to me. I watched her till she became invisible, and then I took my own leave of the place. I returned to town at a swinging pace, and marched straight to the little yellow house near the river. I took the liberty of entering without a knock, and encountering no interruption, made my way to Captain Diamond's room. Outside the door, on a low bench, with folded arms, sat the sable Belinda.

"How is he?" I asked.

"He's gone to glory."

"Dead?" I cried.

She rose with a sort of tragic chuckle.

"He's as big a ghost as any of them now!"

I passed into the room and found the old man lying there irredeemably rigid and still. I wrote that evening a few lines which I proposed on the morrow

to place beneath the stone, near the well; but my promise was not destined to be executed. I slept that night very ill — it was natural — and in my restlessness left my bed to walk about the room. As I did so I caught sight, in passing my window, of a red glow in the northwestern sky. A house was on fire in the country, and evidently burning fast. It lay in the same direction as the scene of my evening's adventures, and as I stood watching the crimson horizon I was startled by a sharp memory. I had blown out the candle which lighted me, with my companion, to the door which we escaped, but I had not accounted for the other light, which she had carried into the hall and dropped — heaven knew where — in her consternation.

The next day I walked out with my folded letter and turned into the familiar crossroad. The haunted house was a mass of charred beams and smoldering ashes; the well-cover had been pulled off, in quest of water, by the few neighbors who had had the audacity to contest what they must have regarded as a demon-kindled blaze, the loose stones were completely displaced, and the earth had been trampled into puddles.

## INTRODUCTION (*Continued From Page 4*)

Given the primary assumptions behind stories dealing with Satan's contracts, the question arises as to whether the Devil ought to be depicted as cheating, or whether he scrupulously fulfills his share of the bargain. While we feel that it makes for a better story to take the latter view, we're open to argument on the question. The Devil is, of course, the Great Deceiver — but the insidious thing here is that it is not necessary for him to make statements that are totally false; he only has to withhold the full truth in order to mislead humans who imagine that they can do business with him and profit thereby.

*Robert A. W. Lowndes*

## *It is Written...*

Commenting on our introduction in the February issue, Herman Stowell King, of Newport News, Va., writes, "In seeking distinctions between horror and terror, it seems to me that terror is primarily a mental fear, whereas horror is visceral; terror may paralyse, but need not cause revulsion as does horror. Most of Poe's stories are nearly pure horror; most of Blackwood's are nearly pure terror. Terror is a cleaner fear than horror. It carries no charnel odor."

"May I commend you," writes Oliver J. Taylor, Jr., from Bristol, Tenn., "for the selection of Mr. Arthur J. Burks' short story, *The Place Of The Pythons*, in your February issue. It represents, in my opinion, a rare combination of characterization, setting, and suspense done in a most readable — 'unputdownable' in fact — way. As a writer myself, I have found it progressively difficult to 'get into' the contemporary short story. This little gem was the exception. From the first sentence I was intrigued by the story, and then, as I progressed, the plot gripped me until I was no longer aware of my surroundings — finding myself transported from my bedroom to the sultry, exotic South Seas."

Whether you, the individual reader, agree with Mr. Taylor on this particular story, is not important. The effect that Mr. Burks' tale had upon him is the effect that we hope you will obtain from at least one story in each issue — and that is only a minimum program, as we really want to bring out issues in which most of the stories will strike you as being "unputdownable".

"I was very pleased," writes Keith Darland from Ontario, "to see that you now have a letter department in MOH. I enjoyed reading it almost as much as I enjoyed reading the stories."

## Coming Next Issue

I flashed on my light at once and its great beam cut a hole through the darkness down toward the hissing. Something grayish-yellow moved there . . . was approaching. It seemed an enormous distance away but came on at a terrific rate of speed. Then it began to take shape and form to my eyes and . . . it was indescribable. A huge head filled with needle-like teeth and soft-looking shapeless legs — that may give some idea. The mouth was open and its cavernous size shut off almost all view of the body. I had hardly time to gasp before Colonel Marsh's elephant gun went off like a thunderclap. He must have missed, for the onrush did not pause a second. The hissing was like steam escaping from a boiler now and the Thing flung itself against the rocky bulwark as Seeman and Smithers fired point-blank at its open mouth. But on it came, the momentum of its charge, I suppose, enabling it to give one last upward leap that brought it half over the ledge. We leaped away as the explosive bullets burst inside it and my torch wavered off the huge body an instant.

When I turned it back again in fear and trembling, half-expecting to see it charging me, I illuminated the great mass lying inert half over the precipice. "Hold the light steady," Smithers called to me. "Let's try to pull it all the way up."

The three of them tugged and strained for a few minutes and succeeded in moving it two feet. I moved up close and started back at the odd odor — like spoiled eggs. The Thing was easily twelve feet long and must have weighed a ton. It was brownish yellow and hairless. But the mouth was the startling part of it, for the jaws were like two semi-circles three feet in diameter and the teeth like so many spears set in it — hundreds of them. Somewhere I vaguely remembered seeing a mouth and teeth like that.

"Great God, Smithers! What is the thing?"

"You know as much as I. Do you suppose we could get it back to the gun room?"

"Better phone the police! A beast like this roaming the countryside . . ."

"Hmmm!" said Smithers. "Quiet a moment!"

We strained our ears and eyes. One of the distant lights was floating toward us! As we looked, it rose over our heads and swooped down. One of the guns roared out as my light revealed a black bat-like flying creature . . .

*You will not want to miss this tale, which appeared in the popular "Stranger Club" series; selected through your nominations.*

# CAVERNS OF HORROR

by Laurence Manning

While we do not rate the letter department in computing how you, the readers, found the contents of any given issue, we are interested in your comments about this, as well as every other feature of the magazine. Continuance of this department will depend upon your letters and upon your views; so long as a majority of you enjoy reading it, and your letters keep coming in, we will feel it's wanted.

Ronald K. Tacelli writes from East Boston, Mass., "Will folly never cease? Will carping never cease? Good God! Are people *never* satisfied? I was shocked — shocked — by the number of nasty, impertinent letters by so-called fans telling you what you should do and what you should not do. Telling is merely a euphemism for *ordering*. (I was especially annoyed at the comic-bookian who complained about your cover — some fan!) Readers should have more respect for the editor's intelligence — you've done an excellent job, so far."

We are just as happy, Mr. Tacelli, that you never saw the letters we used to write to editors when we were a fan, years back! Seriously . . . we asked for comment, we asked for criticism, we asked for expressions of how the reader really feels about the magazine. We're not under obligation to agree with each and every view expressed — but some of the suggestions, *even if they sound like orders*, are valuable. *One or two letters* expressing dislike of our cover, for example, might not mean too much except that the writers didn't like the cover. But we published this opinion in order to draw the rest of you out, if possible. If a hundred or so wrote in to agree — that would be a meaningful complaint. And, very often, just *one* criticism can show us where, to our own eyes, we've slipped. Intelligence we may have — but perfection is something else again. Perfection we'll never achieve in this life, but imperfections can be improved at times, if we find them out. And even the most intelligent person often has to be shown the most obvious imperfections . . .

Doug Haise writes from Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, "Scott Kutina seems to have it in for science fiction. If you continue with your variety policy in the future, science fiction should be included. Fundamentally, though, such stories should be horror stories. I feel that most of your stories are just written to create a "gothic atmosphere", which generally falls flat on its face. I believe in *some* gothic horror, but a lot of good modern horror stories have been written, too . . . Reprints are good stories, and not everybody knows as much Wells as Mrs. Bradford thinks."

Several readers agree that science fiction belongs in our pages, always providing that the story in question is fundamentally within the horror or strange orbit. We have several fine examples in mind for you, when the proper arrangements can be made — this often takes time; meanwhile, we pore over the daily submissions, for we are open for new stories in this category, too.

From Hawaii, Mrs. M. Schwab writes, "I concur with Mr. J. W. Daley in the February issue that there is a need for caution in publishing stories in the Lovecraft school; however, I would not go so far as to say, 'No Lovecraft, etc.' I would like to see you continue to print stories in the genre with your undoubted care in selecting the lesser known works of this school of writing, providing the quality of the work justified its printing. Good literature is ageless, and we have only to regard the work of H. G. Wells and Edgar Allan Poe to confirm this."

"In regard to science fiction, I hardly see how you can steer clear of this media in our times. A good story of imagination should not be limited to the Victorian Era. By all means, publish *any* good story that is huckle-raising, regardless of its setting — past, present, or future."

As we noted in our last issue, *some* Lovecraft certainly seems to be wanted; and Don Daudelin, of Arlington, Texas, adds his voice to this chorus, writing, "I disagree with Mr. Daley concerning Lovecraft. Those of us just beginning to read his works find them very hard to come by. I would appreciate some of his lesser-known stories."

Commenting on *The Repairer Of Reputations*, a reader who requests anonymity writes, "It's been fifteen years or better since I last read Chambers' story, and although I liked it then, it seems much better than my memory said. What an astonishingly good writer Chambers was when he had something to work with that interested him! Although there are excesses here and there, still his portrait of a madman (I guess I should say 'portrait of a mentally-disturbed individual,' if I'm to be contemporary — but I sometimes wonder which is the more accurate phrase) is remarkably good. Allowing for time and style, by the way, the story rather reminds me of something that GALAXY might have published after its first couple of years. I think Gold and Chambers might have made quite a combination.) . . .

"*Jean Bouchon* is a splendid story. It's beautifully written. I hope the other readers like it as well as I do. Keller's *Seeds Of Death* would have ranked higher with me if the story had been 'purer' — as it is, it seems to exist on two different, and incompatible, levels. The apparatus of the shell game strikes me as being somewhat out of place; in a minor way, a little like Mickey Spillane as Mike Hammer making a guest appearance in *Crime And Punishment*. Still, I may be overlooking something; there are seeming anomalies in the story that I do not understand."

When we first read, *Repairer Of Reputations*, some twenty-five-odd years back, we were disappointed at the ending, expecting something weird in the

### Reader's Preference Coupon

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I liked the following items best in the July issue:

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I did not care for the following items:

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Lovecraftian sense, from having read HPL's praise of *King In Yellow*. Re-reading it for consideration, we had an experience similar to yours; it held up much better the second time, once we no longer had mistaken expectations.

While the majority of the letters we receive are congratulatory, it's a relief to find a good old-fashioned blast now and then. Beware, when all men speak well of you, sayeth the Scriptures! Roger Alan Cox saves us from this fate, writing from Augusta, Georgia, "Your periodical is very interesting, but you'll have to meet higher standards if you expect to meet the competition halfway. You need good art work, a better, more compact print, and stories other than reprints to attract readers. Reprints are fine, but you need more original work. As a rule, no more than two reprints should be in one issue."

More original stories are certainly wanted here! However, a story has to strike us as being good enough to read three times in order to qualify; and while we may — alas, not being perfect — declare qualified some stories which you would not accept were you editor, we'd be fools indeed to risk disgusting you with stories which we ourselves thought were substandard at the time!

Readers, which stories did you like best in this issue? Which, if any, did you consider as editorial errors? We'd be delighted to see your ratings, top to bottom for the entire issue (ties always permitted) but won't you at least let us know which you thought were tops? Coupons, postcard, or letters — all are welcome.

In the February issue, your votes showed the following stories to have been the best liked: (1) *The Seeds Of Death*, by David H. Keller; (2) *The Repairer Of Renutations*, by Robert W. Chambers; (3) *The Place Of The Pythons*, by Arthur J. Burks; (4) *The Seeking Thing*, by Janet Hirsch; (5) *They That Wait*, by H. S. W. Chibbett. Most controversial: *The Door*, by Rachel Cosgrove Payes.

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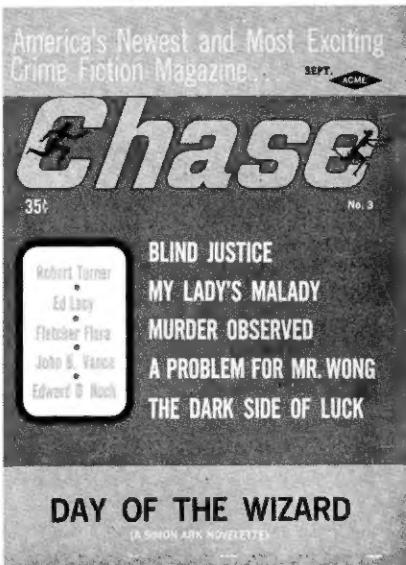
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